2
「白嶺の幻肢虎」
上巻
星空めてお
イラストBUNBUN
ファイヤーガール
FIRE GIRL

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Fire Girl
vol.2: Phantom Limb Tiger of the White Peak
Part A
by Meteor Hoshizora

Translation Group: Nanodesu

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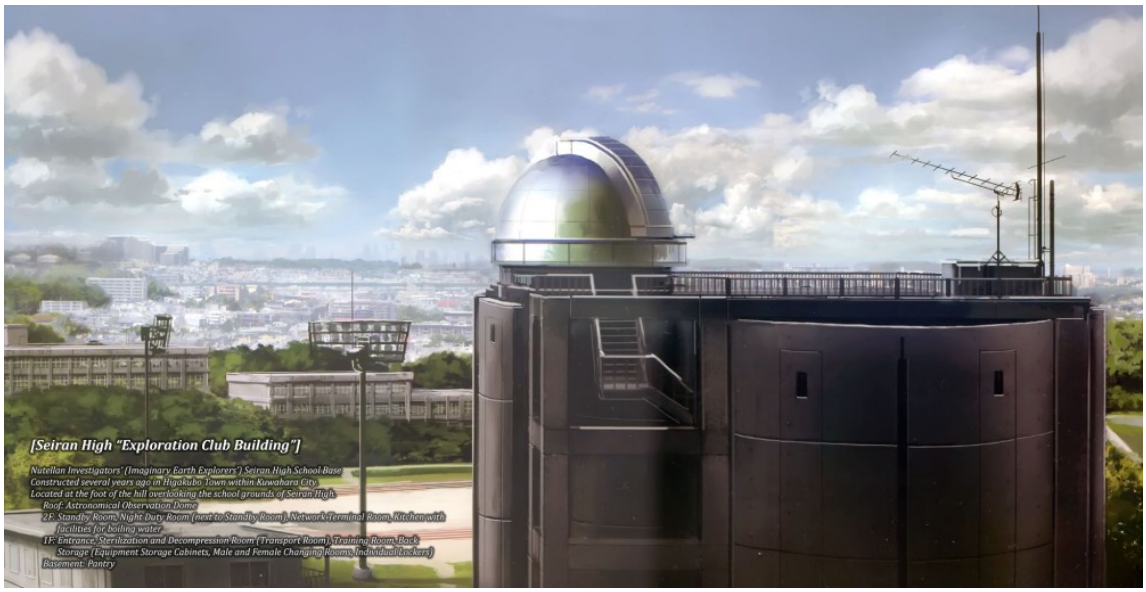
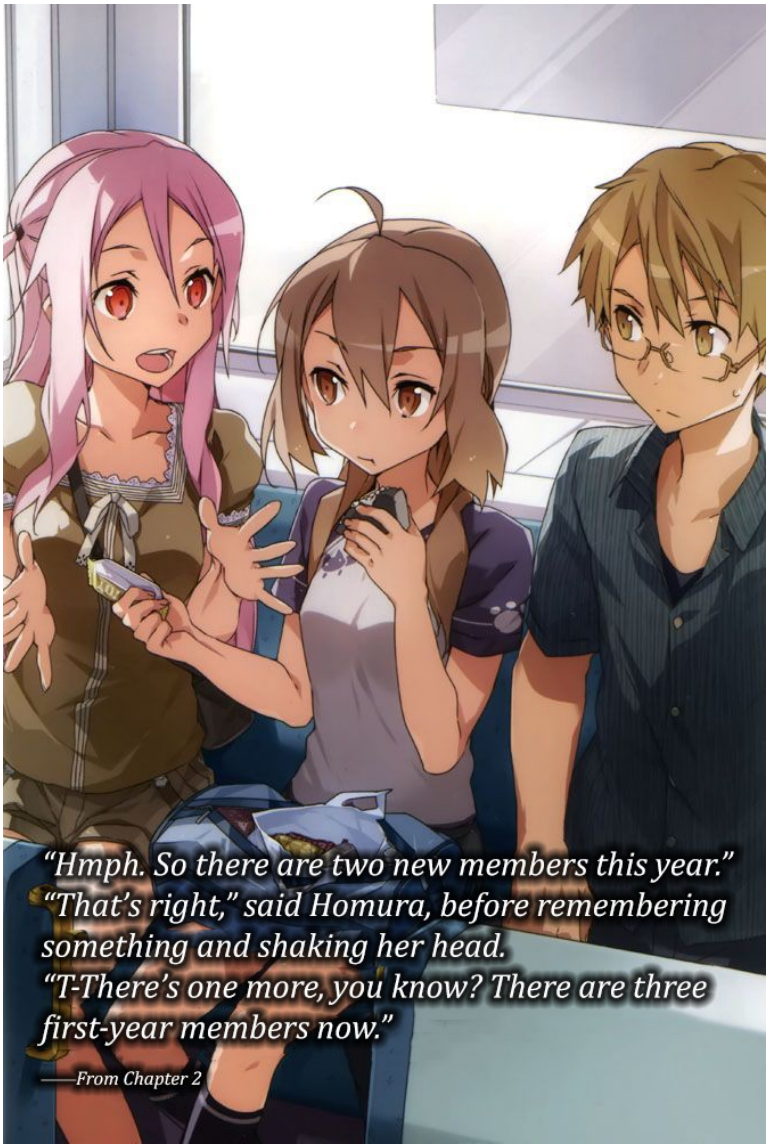
CHARACTER
ファイヤーボール
1st Year at Kanazawa Nanto High
Exploration Club Member
otomaru genya
1st Year at Tsurutatsu Denpa High
Exploration Club Member
himekawa shizune
2nd Year at Daiichi
Prefectural School Nagatsu High
Exploration Club President
tenryuu kazuma
1st Year at Hiyoshidaira High
Exploration Club Member
saho akiho
1st Year at Hiyoshidaira High
Exploration Club Member
kanae yuri
2nd Year at Seiran High
Former Exploration Club Member
inari sunao


[Seiran High "Exploration Club Building"]
Nutellan Investigators' (Imaginary Earth Explorers') Seiran High School Base
Constructed several years ago in Higashiuho Town within Kuwahara City
Located at the foot of the hill overlooking the school grounds of Seiran High.
Roof: Astronomical Observation Dome
2F: Standby Room, Night Duty Room (next to Standby Room), Network Terminal Room, Kitchen with facilities for boiling water
1F: Entrance, Sterilization and Decompression Room (Transport Room), Training Room, Back Storage (Equipment Storage Cabinets, Male and Female Changing Rooms, Individual Lockers)
Basement: Pantry

"Otomaru, huh—then you must be Himekawa-san from Tomakomai Denpa, right?"
"Yes, you're spot on. Hello, Touya-kun."
Even while she greeted Touya, Himekawa's gaze seemed to be fixed on Ameno.
"Ah... It's the real Ameno-chan... Amazing... Your movements are so natural..."
—From Chapter 3


“Hmph. So there are two new members this year.”
“That’s right,” said Homura, before remembering something and shaking her head.
“T-There’s one more, you know? There are three first-year members now.”
——From Chapter 2

Chapter 1

“See ya, Touya-kun.”
After school.
Hinooka Homura waved her hand carrying her bag at the boy she encountered at the school entrance.
The long-awaited summer vacation began tomorrow.
The area around the school shoe racks was filled with noisy and buoyant students, and Homura was chipper herself as she swiftly slipped her indoor shoes into her purse.
“I’m heading home first. See you again in the second semester!”
“…Hah?”
As Homura spoke with a energetic tone, Touya gave her a withering stare.
But Homura chose to pretend not to see that.
“We’re going to go and discuss what we’re going to do over the break, so I’ll be quite busy!”
“I didn’t hear anything about that, though,” interjected Kujou Orie, Homura’s friend, from where she waited a step ahead at the door.
“Err, yeah, like I said, we’re going to discuss it on our way home.”
“…Hmph.”
“What’s with that ‘hmph’?”
Not letting herself be discouraged by her friend’s weak reply, Homura shot a “See ya” at Touya and waved in an over-exaggerated fashion.
But his merciless words pulled Homura back before she could walk away.
“You haven’t forgotten about the plans for our summer club activities, right?”
Screeeeech.
“…Ah, wait, please stop, don’t make me remember it!”
“But even excluding that, don’t you have to take make-up lessons over the summer anyway?”
Screeeeech, screeeeeech.
“I’m not listening, I’m not listening, I’m not listening! I’ll properly check the email on the club activities schedule later! So please don’t erase this feeling of absolute freedom as I delude myself into thinking I can do whatever I want starting tomorrow for just this moment! The reason we high school students diligently go to school every day is for the sake of this day, this moment, right? This single instant that signals the start of an endless summer vacation in our minds!”
Touya looked at her in disbelief.
Kujou listened to her expressionlessly.
The two of them exchanged brief glances, and then—
“Wrong.”

“That’s wrong.”
Homura was completely refuted from both the front and back.
“Studying is so that—we can have a future with freedom and many possibilities.”
“It’s because we want to know—the tips and wisdom accumulated by our forbearers.”
The two of them exchanged glances again over the discrepancy in their answers, while Homura plugged her ears with both hands.
“It’s too late now. It’s collapsed. My dreams of summer vacation have completely crashed and burned away.”
As Homura slumped forward, crestfallen, Touya picked up the purse at her feet and took out her indoor shoes without permission, directing a nod at Kujou.
“Sorry, Kujou. I’ll be borrowing this girl.”
Kujou nodded silently.
“An instant reply!? W-Wait, please say something to this kidnapper.”
Homura begged for help from Kujou, who made a slightly troubled expression…
“Goodbye, Hinooka-san. If you survive, let’s meet again in the second semester.”
…But remained completely unsympathetic.
“H-How cold of you. That isn’t just a joke in my case, you know~?”
Touya then left the school entrance and began walking quickly through the school hallways, all while carrying Homura’s bag under his arm as a hostage.
Homura followed after him, on the verge of tears.
“I’ll bear a grudge against you for the rest of my life, for having interrupted the date between me and Kujou-san!”
“Really, your whole life? Summer vacation is pretty long, so there’s no need to get all flustered over a little lost time.”
“It’s very hard to catch and keep hold of Kujou-san, you know…” Homura grumbled.
She halted in surprise when Touya unexpectedly turned to head in a different direction than usual.
“We’re not going to the club building? I thought for sure that Mori-chan had announced an emergency summons.”
“No…the truth is, it’d be awkward to go to the club building right now.”
“…Then are you taking me somewhere for personal reasons?”
“It has to do with the entire Exploration Club. You too, Hinooka.”
“In that case—”
“Well, I do apologize for having dragged you off without explaining anything. Please accompany me for a bit.”
“What’s this all about?”
“It’s about her—Inari-senpai.”

The place that Touya led Homura to turned out to be the student council room on the third floor of the school building.
“Thanks, Kurama-san.”
“Pardon our sudden intrusion.”
“It’s fine, it’s fine,” said a female student, Kurama Kifune-san, with a shake of her head.
She was the only one inside the student council room when the two of them arrived.
“If I remember correctly…You’re in the same class as Touya-kun, right, Kurama-san?”
“Yep.”
“Then Ame-chan is also in your class.”
“Ame-chan? Ah, Fujimori Ameno-san? Yeah. Thanks to her, I’ve had no shortage of stuff to post about on our blog.”
She pointed at the laptop she’d been in the middle of working on before they came in.
It was displaying the student council’s notification on the school’s website, and the entries were almost wholly about her personal, everyday experiences.
It seemed she and the rest of the council were quite busy, based on the piles of summer itineraries for every club on top of her wide desk.
Not minding that in the least, Homura switched to her chatty mode.
“Right? I’m so jealous.”
“I’d actually like to write about you too, though, Hinooka-san.”
“Me? I don’t mind if you do, you know?”
“No, you really should mind. Hey, Hinooka, can we save the chatting for later and move on to the main topic?”
“Yeah, yeah. That’s what I thought you’d say—so, you mentioned Inari-senpai?”
“The truth is, it seems she came to school today.”
“—Eh?”
Homura’s eyes widened at the unexpected news.
“The second year student Inari-san? She actually came?”
Kurama brought her chair closer with a meek expression.
She turned to give Touya a look that asked ‘Can I tell her?’, and Touya nodded.
Inari-senpai was a second year student and a member of the Exploration Club.
She should have been spending all her time in the club as a senpai to the first year members Homura and Touya. However, she’d been skipping school since the end of last year.
After an accident occurred during Exploration Club activities, she went to recuperate at home and had taken a long leave of absence from school.
Homura and Touya didn’t know the details of the accident. All the people involved in it kept their lips sealed on the matter.

The president of the Exploration Club, Misasagi-senpai, had also been stranded in the accident. But ever since then, her friendship with her best friend Inari had been decisively broken. Their kind senpai, who usually taught and guided the two of them without reservation, became dejected whenever the subject of the accident came up.
In the end, the accident and the absence of Inari-senpai lay as a vague source of unease hidden beneath the usual bright mood of the Exploration Club.
“—Is Inari senpai still in the school building?” Homura asked.
“No, she’s already gone home,” Touya replied. “From what I heard, she’s going to resume school next semester, so she showed up to class to inform the teacher. So she was here for less than an hour.”
“I heard she was hospitalized for a while, but I don’t know how much she has recovered… And does your club president Misasagi know about this?”
Touya shook his head at Kurama’s question.
“I don’t know. And even if she doesn’t know about it, broaching the subject to her would be a bit…”
…difficult to do.
Homura finally understood why Touya had purposefully avoided the club building and borrowed the student council room. This was certainly a subject they couldn’t lightly speak of in front of the club president, whose relationship with Inari had been broken off.
However, Homura still wasn’t satisfied with this.
“What’s with that dejected face, Touya-kun?”
She gave him a slap to the back of the head.
“Oww. Don’t hit me.”
“Isn’t this a good thing? A student who has been absent for nearly a year has finally returned to school. President Misasagi will surely be happy too, won’t she?”
“That’s true, but…”
Worried about Touya’s half-hearted response, Homura turned to Kurama.
“Kurama-san, are you also worried about Inari-senpai? Even Exploration Club members like us haven’t directly met het yet.”
“Well, you know, just a bit…ah!?”
Just as Kurama was shrugging vaguely, she practically jumped out of her chair at the sight of the wicked grin peeking out through the slightly-opened door.
“President? Y-You were here!?”
“That’s Rokujizou Takara,” said Touya to fill in Homura.
“I already met her,” Homura replied smugly.
“Fufufu. It’s only natural Kurama would be worried. Right?”
Ignoring Kurama’s sullen glare, Student Council President Rokujizou entered the room as she closed the door behind her and looked at Touya insinuatingly.
“—So, who did you hear this from, young man?”

“Even I have acquaintances among my upperclassman. It’s not like there’s a gag order on this. In fact, I came here in order to hear about it in greater detail from you, president.”
“Is that so? Sorry about that.”
The student council president sat down in a chair while sheepishly scratching her head, but then she suddenly turned to look at Homura.
She held out a finger to the ribbon tying up the back of Homura’s hair and touched it to make it sway.
“You’re cute as always, Hinooka-san. You have a refreshing summer-like air about you today.”
“Thanks.”
The president folded her arms and nodded enthusiastically, and then leaned back sloppily against her chair and turned back to Kurama.
“In comparison…What’s with you, Kurama? Even though it’s summer, your hair is perfectly combed, you’re wearing a sweater, and you even have sleeves covering your arms. Are you an old grandma? Are you the student council’s fussy senior office lady?”
“It’s because a certain someone keeps lowering the temperature so much with the air conditioning that I have to take such defensive measures.”
“Considering how people are always coming in and out of the student council room all the time, this temperature is just right. You’re really boring, you know?”
Out of good manners, Kurama offered barley tea even to this excessively warm-blooded president.
“I spend most of my time sitting in this room—unlike you, always hopping around everywhere throughout the school.”
Seeing Touya visibly grow impatient while listening to this childish conversation, the president burst out laughing and gave a broad smile.
“Sorry about that. Back to the subject of Inari.”
“…Did you know she came here today, president?”
“I heard Inari had come to school from the teacher in charge of my class after the morning assembly. I didn’t get the chance to meet her myself. Apparently she came to school with her parents, greeted her classmates and class teacher, and then left immediately after.”
“Is it true that she’s returning to school starting next semester?” asked Touya for confirmation.
“That’s what I heard. If it’s true, it’s wonderful news.”
“…Has Misasagi-senpai heard about this yet?” Homura asked.
“I haven’t told Mayo about it.”
“Why? We should tell her.”
In the face of Homura’s tenaciousness, both Rokujizou and Touya made awkward faces.
“Hmph, I see now,” said Homura petulantly. “So your friendship with her is only worth that much? Then I’ll go tell her myself.”

“I won’t stop you, but Mayo has already gone home to take care of some family business.”
“Eh…Eeh~”
Homura was visibly disappointed.
In her mind, she could still see it—that goldfish and fox-cat stamp.
It was the personal mark of Misasagi-senpai and Inari-senpai placed on the wrappings of the club’s preserved food, which Misasagi-senpai had explained when they’d previously camped on Nutella.
Homura still hadn’t forgotten Misasagi-senpai’s happy expression as she’d talked about it.
Homura and Touya walked together on their way home from school.
The afternoon sunlight was scorching hot as it pierced their skin.
Desperately wishing for shade while swaying unsteadily on her feet, Homura mumbled with a sigh.
“I don’t think it’s right to force someone to go to school when they don’t want to, you know?”
Those blunt words made Touya slump his shoulders as he pushed his bicycle.
“Right?” pressed Homura.
“Don’t give me that. Aren’t you being a bit too unfeeling? You were saying the opposite before, weren’t you?”
“I don’t want to be called unfeeling by you of all people, Touya-kun.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”
Though he said that, Touya’s expression was bitter, perhaps because he too thought himself cowardly.
“There’s no need to concern yourself with the relationship between those two so much. You should let them deal with it themselves.”
“…Even though they’re our senpai in the Exploration Club?”
“Hmph, so what? …Well, saying that might be going too far, but I’ve just recently started doing club activities, so I don’t really feel that kind of solidarity.”
“Is that how it is?”
“Well, I do want to help the club president if she’s troubled… but Inari-san seems like the kind of troublesome person who does whatever she pleases, you know?”
“…Hey now.”
Touya was taken aback at how Homura could say so much about a person she hadn’t even met.
“So in other words, Touya-kun, you want to do something about Inari-senpai because you want to help Misasagi-senpai, right?”
“Well, pretty much.”
“…Hmm?”
Having expected some shocked and embarrassed reaction from him, Homura was surprised by this lackluster response and stared closely at this boy in love.

He continued to push his bicycle while staring straight ahead with no change.
“—But, you know, it’s not like our club does individual matches like in sports. Even someone like her is our comrade. We can’t just ignore and abandon her like this.”
“Comrade… huh?”
Homura crossed her arms, obviously putting on another one of her embellished performances.
“Yeah… comrades are important. For all our sakes… or maybe for Japan’s future, no, for the fate of the world…”
Touya found it too troublesome to retort.
There were no club activities scheduled for the last day of the semester. However, Touya still felt some guilt at going straight home without stopping by the clubroom at all.
As he wondered if anyone was in the clubroom right now, Homura began to speak with a meek expression.
“Ah, there might be one bad thing about this.”
“What?”
“If Inari-senpai returns to the club… We won’t be able to ride in Mori-chan’s car! We’ll be over-capacity!”
“…Ah, because we’ll end up having six members in total.”
“Yeah.”
“Are you an idiot? That’s what you’re worried about? …Then how about we put Ameno in the trunk when that happens?”
Eeeh. How terrible.
“That’s terrible. Ahahaha.”
Homura let out a carefree laugh.
Her expression was bright and lively, with not a hint of seriousness.
Touya both sighed and smiled resignedly at her ever carefree attitude, before changing the topic.
“Hinooka, are you free after this?”
“Eh?” Homura’s smile froze on her face. “…I’m having dinner at home with my family tonight.”
“Then tomorrow.”
“Wait, tomorrow?”
Homura became somewhat flustered. Her ponytail swished frantically.
“W-Well, tomorrow’s the first day of summer vacation, so my schedule is free, I guess? But I have to secure an appointment with Kujou-san as quick as possible, so—”
“Let’s go to Inari-senpai’s home tomorrow.”
Homura was completely taken aback.
“W-Why…!? Can’t you go by yourself!?”
“I already tried that. I told you before, remember? I was chased away at the front door. This time, I’m going to try getting through to her by showing her that our club has obtained an unreliable new member.”

“You’re going to use me as a pretext to get Inari-senpai to come back to the club? There’s no way that will work.”
“Well, even if that plan won’t work—”
Homura couldn’t help become indignant at how easily he admitted the low chances of success.
“I want to ask her directly what she intends to do now. Yeah, I’ve decided. I’ll go, even if it’s by myself. If you’re going to come, be in front of the station by 10 o’clock.”
“That early? But it’s the first day of summer vacation…”
“Come on, you get up early to go jogging anyway, right?”
“But…”
Homura pouted as she tried to put up at least some resistance.
“…Then, after I wake up…”
“You’ll go back to sleep?”
Touya said that with a laugh, and Homura glared at him resentfully.
The next day.
As cicadas chirped cheerfully right from the start of the morning, Homura and Touya walked through a residential district.
“Today’s hot too.”
“Yeah,” replied Homura curtly. The summer-appropriate sleeved dress she wore was an unexpectedly refreshing look on her. She peeked at the basket Touya was carrying in his hands.
“What’s that? A fruit basket?”
“Ah, well, I brought a greeting gift just in case.”
“Wow, you really are conscientious, Touya-kun. You should call this kind of thing, umm, a “recovery celebration gift”. You intend to win her over with presents?”
“Something like that.”
Touya ascended the hill road with a slack expression.
Walking several steps ahead of him to move beneath the partial shade of the trees along the roadside, Homura swiveled her head to survey their surroundings. The residential district, usually quiet in the morning, was filled with the jovial voices of children enjoying their summer vacation.
“Hey, Hinooka—that’s one of our club’s camera, isn’t it?”
“Yeah, it’s one of the spares. Can’t believe you noticed just by looking at it.”
Homura turned around and held out the heavy pouch she was carrying.
It contained a simple yet reliable analog camera.
Leaving the pouch’s shoulder-strap in place, Homura brought it closer so Touya could see the camera’s viewfinder that was poking out of the bag.
“I switched the camera case because the original’s appearance was too unrefined and stood out a lot, though. Mori-chan said to make sure I carry it on me at all times.”
“The pictures you took last time came out quite terribly.”
“Yeah. They were terrible all right.”

“So you’re aware of it. I guess you don’t read travel articles in journals and magazines just for show, huh?”
“I’m an amusement park cameraman, after all.”
“—Huh?”
“Like, ‘Through my pictures, you’ll feel like you’ve been brought to an amusement park attraction, whether on the battlefield or at a World Heritage Site!’…or something like that. Not being able to take exciting photos makes me feel apologetic towards the people who made this Nutella-use camera…”
“You don’t need to try and show off when you take pictures. It’s just for our club’s data and document materials, after all.”
“But I want to take pictures that I can look back on and smile at since I’m doing it anyway, you know?”
“No, like I said—”
After they scaled the hill and took a turn down a side road, they arrived at their destination.
It was a stylish-house that looked Victorian-style, the kind you’d easily find in an American harbor town. Since it was on top of the hill, the second floor window probably had quite a nice view.
As expected, there was a nameplate that read “Inari” on the front door.
Homura felt tense as she stood in front of the doorbell button on the entrance intercom, with a camera attached to it.
Touya and Homura exchanged looks, trying to get the other to push the button through eye contact. Homura swiftly stole the fruit basket, thereby occupying her own hands and forcing the difficult role onto Touya.
“Why do you look like you’re getting ready to dash off?”
“Y-You know…”
“Are you a grade-schooler?”
Touya rang the doorbell.
When Homura peeked to the side of the front door, she caught sight of a large off-road bike.
[—Yes, who is it?]
A low male voice.
Touya quickly straightened his back as he answered back, despite the fact that there was no one actually in front of him.
“Sorry to intrude. I’m Touya, from Seiran High.”
[Ah, a classmate of Sunao?]
“No, that’s not—”
[Please wait a moment. I’ll go to the front door right away.]
The intercom speaker cut off. It appeared someone was coming out from inside the house.
Tense, Homura glanced at Touya.
“…Was that Inari-senpai’s father?”
“…Probably, I guess?”

“W-What do we do if he gets angry and shouts ‘How dare you harass my daughter!’ or something?”
“That’s…possible, if you consider what’s happened in the past. Hey, don’t run away!”
Touya grabbed Homura’s collar.
As they quarrelled like this before the front door, it suddenly opened and a somewhat slender man wearing glasses appeared.
“How nice, to be young and lively. Welcome, I’m the father of Inari Sunao.”
A tanned face and tanned arms. Unkempt, ruffled hair. A chin with conspicuous beard stubbles and band-aids on it.
He was a gentle-looking man, smiling brightly.
He wore a polo shirt with a tie around his neck, a summer vest that was roughly put on and a pair of jeans, all of it together giving off a summer feel with no indication of his occupation.
After Touya and Homura introduced themselves with their name and school year, Inari-senpai’s father expressed his appreciation as he peeked at the proffered fruit basket.
“Thank you. You even courteously brought us something like this.”
“It’s not much, though. Ehehe.”
“I’m the one who brought it, remember?”
“Since you went to the trouble of bringing this here, I should give you both something in return. Yeah, if I remember right, we still have that souvenir from Maldives[1]…”
“A souvenir from Maldives?”
Homura sharply responded to those words. But Touya stopped the man as he was about to head back inside.
“Ah, that isn’t necessary.”
“Hmm? Is that so?”
Homura turned to face Touya with a serious expression that plainly asked ‘Why?’, but Touya just gave her a light chop to the forehead.
“Argh.”
“Don’t forget our original objective.”
—Right. Unfortunately, Inari-senpai wasn’t at home.
Regrettably, it appeared she wouldn’t be back any time soon either.
“Sunao is in the middle of a rehab session. She’s at a nearby gym right now. You know, a public gym.”
“Yes, I know of it,” said Touya with a nod.
“Rehab, huh… Is Inari-senpai’s physical condition still bad?” asked Homura.
“No, no, there’s no need to worry at all.”
Inari-senpai’s father waved his hands to reassure her. He was the kind of person who gestured a lot.
“Thank goodness.”
Seeing Homura sigh in relief, the man’s smile clouded over a bit, which startled Homura and Touya.

“…Well, perhaps ‘at all’ isn’t quite right. We did worry about her a lot. But I’m truly relieved now. You see, I’m not going to be in Japan when the next school semester starts, so I went with Sunao to give my greetings to the school yesterday. Of course, Sunao had already resolved herself to go back to school before this, though.”
Touya meekly cut into his explanation.
“Umm, we’re members of the Exploration Club.”
“I know.”
The man nodded.
The ever meticulous Touya showed his Seiran High student ID card and his Exploration Club ID card to him. Homura also hurried to do the same thing.
“It’s strange that a pair of Sunao’s club juniors would be so close to her that they would come visit her when she’s been absent from school for so long.”
“…I-I suppose so,” said Homura with a bitter smile.
Even after hearing the words ‘Exploration Club’, the man maintained his calm attitude.
“The truth is—”
Just when Touya tried to get to the main point of their visit, the man caught sight of Homura’s pouch and spoke up.
“Is that an analog camera? Wow, that’s a rare sight these days.”
“Ah.”
Homura pulled in the shoulder strap to bring the pouch in front of her, and then took out the contents to show it to him.
It was a plain and ordinary black camera with no adornments.
“You could tell?”
“It’s heavy, right? People rarely walk around carrying that.”
“Hmm, I tried to make it not obvious, though.”
“Hahaha. Oh, can I?”
Homura held out the camera to him, and the man happily accepted it.
The way he studied and set up the piece of equipment while marveling over it really seemed natural and fitting.
“Despite how I look…actually, what do I look like?”
The man rubbed his chin and asked with a wry smile.
“You’re talking about your job?”
“Right, right.”
Homura and Touya exchanged looks. Finally, Touya spoke up with a troubled expression.
“…A cameraman? That’s the first thing that comes to mind.”
“Thank you. It makes me very happy to hear that. But the truth is a little different.”
“Ah, wait a minute—” Homura placed a finger to her brow in thought. “I feel like I remember seeing—no, hearing your voice before?”
“Hmm?”

“Were you a commentator on a satellite broadcast program at the end of last week?” asked Homura. “But the commentator on that program had very different hair…”
“Then a maybe he’s a performer?” suggested Touya. “What was the program about?”
“Sorry, I forgot. My dad was the one who mainly watched it. I get the feeling…it was something about countermeasures against desertification in Europe?”
“That was a rebroadcasted program. It was edited and compiled last year, I think. This is my occupation.”
The man handed out a business card to the two of them.
The tile read ‘National Geographic, Japanese Division, Editor-in-Chief’.
Homura was speechless, while Touya widened his eyes and spoke excitedly.
“National Geographic!? I have a monthly subscription for this magazine!”
“Oh, I’m very glad to hear that. You’re a good guy, Touya-kun.”
“I see…! I’m sorry, I never paid attention to the listing of people related to editing.”
“It’s fine. It’s already more than enough that Exploration Club members like you read it.”
“……”
Having been left to the side by Touya’s excitement, Homura showed little interest as she asked the obvious question.
“What kind of magazine is National Geographic?”
“What kind—It features photos of pristine nature and wild animals, the latest reports by amazing explorers, and even discoveries in space—”
What? What’s so interesting about that? Are you a nature maniac?
…That was the kind of gouging look of disbelief that Homura gave him.
Touya, having his explanation completely disregarded, furrowed his brows.
“Anyways, it’s a must-read for any member of the Exploration Club, for sure!”
“Another one…? Just how many skills are necessary to be in the Exploration Club?”
The man laughed brightly at the two teenagers’ vastly different degrees of enthusiasm in their respective reactions.
“My, the new club members this year are quite interesting.”
“…Err, so then, you’re a reporter?”
“Yes, if you want to stretch the definition of my job. I originally did various jobs like being a cameraman and doing translation work, but I’m quite busy these days. I don’t get much chance to go on trips to take pictures now.”
“Haah. It sounds rough.”
Homura managed a forced smile, but it still didn’t quite click in her mind. Why would he go out of his way to take pictures in dangerous places? Well, it wasn’t like she was one to talk, though. After taking back the camera and putting it in the pouch, Homura suddenly thought of something and spoke up.

“Umm~, do you think you could teach me any tricks for taking good photos…?”
“Why does this not surprise me? That’s really not the attitude to use when asking to be taught by a pro, Hinooka.”
“But I could really use the help.”
“It’s fine, it’s fine. I get asked that a lot, actually.”
After soothing Touya, the man kindly agreed to teach her.
“Let’s see. Would you prefer to learn easy tricks or hard tricks?”
“I-In that case, the easy tricks would be better…”
—The three of them moved over to a wood deck bench.
After discussing camera techniques for a while, Touya’s curiosity was sated, so he once more brought up the original topic.
“I know we don’t have the right to ask this, but—”
“…Hmm?”
“What do you think of Inari-senpai’s…Sunao-san’s activities in the Exploration Club?”
“So it’s about that, huh?”
His only daughter, Inari Sunao, had been stranded on Nutella and nearly lost her life.
But he still hadn’t said a single word of censure about the Exploration Club.
After contemplating it for a short while, he looked at Touya with a serious gaze and spoke.
“I trust Sunao…She’s already an adult who can decide things on her own.”
“…Hmm… And how do you really feel about her being in the Exploration Club?” asked Homura.
“I worry and worry so much my stomach aches! I’ve managed to stay calm in all kinds of hazardous places and situations, but I feel like there’s a hole in my stomach when I think of her going through danger on Nutella.”
“……”
Touya was at a loss for words.
Part of it was because he was honestly impressed by how Homura immediately saw through the man’s official stance, but what bewildered Touya even more was—But the feeling inside him still had yet to take clear form.
The man gave an affable smile and continued speaking.
“But that doesn’t mean that I feel relieved by having her secluded and sheltered at home all the time.”
Exposing his shameful true feelings with a sigh and bitter smile, the man ran a hand through his ruffled hair.
“My wife would definitely hit me if I said this in front of her—but to tell the truth, I’m envious of Sunao and all of you. So much so that I’d like to join the Exploration Club myself if there were a vacancy.”
These words were, in a sense, his true feelings as a person rather than a father or adult. Touya was greatly taken aback.
“Did… Sunao-san say that to you?”

“Conversations like that often come up when we talk, but half as a joke. Of course, I know that it’s impossible for someone my age with how the Transport Rings work. Even so, Sunao said she’d like to go to Nutella with me.”
The man nodded happily.
“…But after she started working in the Exploration Club for half a year, she told me that looking after me on Nutella would be a pain and not to come after all.”
He laughed wryly with a glum and troubled expression.
He was an eccentric and funny father. Homura wanted to talk with him some more, but when she saw Touya’s eye signal, she followed his lead and stood up from the bench to depart.
As they were leaving, Homura asked one more thing.
“Will Sunao-senpai… return to the Exploration Club?”
“You should ask that to Sunao herself. That’s why you came today, right?”
The man called after them as he saw them off.
“Ah, please do come again. And if possible, please tell me more about the Exploration Club. I’m not often in Japan, but I’ll make sure to fly back here when you come over.”
“Yes… Err, if it’s within the range of what I can talk about,” said Touya.
“No, no, what are you saying, Touya-kun? We’re bound by confidentiality, confidentiality!”
“Wha—you!”
Homura leaned forward and cut in in front of Touya.
“If you ever have us over again, how about you do an exclusive news coverage with just me? The truth is, I have a piece of information that would definitely turn into a big scoop—”
“Hey, that isn’t something you can say even as a joke.”
Touya slapped the back of her head.
“Ahaha, sorry, sorry. We’ll definitely come again.”
“*Sigh*… Thank you for your time.”
While agitated by Homura’s loose lips, Touya still expressed his thanks and then began walking the path back home down the hill.
After reluctantly lingering at the front door, Homura hurried off to follow him.
“……”
A slight agitation lurked in Touya’s heart.
What was it that had disconcerted him?
Sunlight flickered through the trees above onto the street. While passively responding to Homura’s usual chatter, Touya pondered over the emotion that had briefly passed through his mind.
It was probably—his childish jealousy towards Inari for having a father who was the exact opposite of his own strict father… or so Touya convinced himself.
Chapter 1 END

YAMATO NADESHIKO CO
KURIYAMA KIFUNE
!?

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES
(1) Maldives: a South Asian island country and republic.

Chapter 2

After leaving the Inari household, Touya and Homura headed to the local gym.
They drank some juice as they rode in an air-conditioned bus.
Since it was the first day of summer vacation, there were quite a lot of bus passengers, even on a weekday like this.
“It’s so inconvenient that I can’t look right away at the photos I took.”
Homura grumbled on the seat next to Touya.
Using the excuse that it was to commemorate their visit, Homura had taken a picture during the course of the conversation about cameras.
It was a photo of a tense Touya and Inari-senpai’s father smiling while making a peace sign as they stood together, a situation that was hard to decipher from a third party’s point of view.
…But she’d still taken a photo of them regardless.
“The film developing is all taken care of by machines, so that evens out the disadvantages, right? The Exploration Club’s exclusive film developing device is quite valuable, you know?”
“I don’t care about that. Ah, that reminds me, Mori-chan boasted about how she had to develop the film by hand in her club days.”
“I can’t imagine Mori-chan doing that kind of troublesome work.”
“Right? She probably foisted it on someone else.”
It was scarily believable.
Perhaps that unfortunate person’s hardships had been part of what led to the introduction of Nutella-use cameras and automatic film developing devices?
The narrow hill road weaved across the hill ridge as the bus drove on.
Beyond the bus windows were summer-like green colors and a cloudless blue sky.
“The gym, huh? I’ve only ever gone there for school events and to go support Tsuyu and her cheerleading. How about you, Touya-kun?”
“Hmm? Yeah, I’ve been there a few times.”
“…Is that so? For matches and stuff?”
Touya nodded.
The local gym was a place where various sport tournaments including cheerleading were held. It was only natural that Touya would be acquainted with it.
“Inari-senpai’s father said that she’s doing rehab sessions at the gym. Does it have those kinds of facilities?”
“I don’t know. I’m not that familiar with everything there either.”
“Touya-kun, do you regret giving up kendo?”
“Ah? No, I haven’t really given it up.”

“But you used to enter national tournaments for it.”
“I just said I didn’t give it up. Though it’s true I don’t enter tournaments anymore.”
Touya glared at Homura as he adjusted the bridge of his glasses.
“Wasn’t there anyone who tried to stop you from leaving?”
“You really don’t give up, do you…? No, the whole thing was pretty neat and simple and no one really said anything about it.”
“Really? But didn’t that make you feel a bit lonely?”
“I still visit the dojo every once in a while. Though, it seems like my father was disappointed.”
“Hmph… Do not chase those who leave[1], huh?”
After thinking it over a little, Homura sighed.
“What we’re doing right now in going to see Inari-senpai is precisely that. We’re chasing after someone who left.”
“…Uugh.”
Homura and Touya arrived at the local public gym.
As expected, there were lots of people here, and the place was brimming with the lively atmosphere of summer.
They went around peeking at the various facilities and conference rooms inside, but there was no sign of anyone that resembled Inari-senpai. And now that they thought about it, they realized that neither of them knew what she looked like either.
“She probably has a nasty face,” said Touya
“And what exactly does a ‘nasty face’ look like?”
“…Well, I’ve only ever gotten a brief glance of her in a photo album before. Was there something of hers in the club building’s female locker room?”
“You want me to find her by following her scent or something? No way, I’m not like you, Touya-kun.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”
As they rebuked each other’s haphazard plans while wandering around the gym, they ran into their target at an unexpected place.
“…Touya-kun, wait a sec.”
“…Ah?”
Called to a stop, Touya looked in the direction Homura pointed at.
Over there was a small indoor court they hadn’t paid much attention to until now.
They could hear loud cheers in a foreign language coming from the practice grounds there, which was divided in half by a low net like what was used in badminton.
In the midst of a group of Southeast Asian-looking dark-skinned players, a petite female figure could be seen running around energetically.
“Re…hab?”
“……”

Moving with quick steps, the girl jumped into the air and swung her legs up high, and then kicked down with a sharp shout that resounded throughout the gym.
A ball made of plastic fell deep into the opposing team's court.
A defender quickly jumped to hit it back but didn't reach it in time, and the ball bounced in an unexpected direction and smashed past the boundary line of the opposing team's court.
"Wow…I've never seen a ball game like that!"
"K-Kick volleyball? What the heck is that!?"
A convalescent girl and an acrobatic ball sport.
Homura and Touya were taken aback by this unexpected combination.
Unaware of these two onlookers, the girl shared high-fives with her teammates.
The girl, having taken up the same position as before on the court as the game resumed, never fell behind the adults around her despite their height difference, and competed with them equally in both offence and defence.
Her light colored hair was wrapped into a bun, with a single tuft of hair hanging down her back like a tail. She was somewhat shorter than Homura.
Based on the various mismatched clothes all the players wore, they seemed to be an amateur team, but their practice was truly an impressive sight to see. However, when Homura and Touya turned to look at the girl for a moment, her movements were quite skillful and filled with an energetic liveliness, causing them to speechlessly stare at her in particular as she played.
The practice game took a short break, and the girl returned to the court side.
She wiped off her sweat with a towel and slowly regulated her breathing as she pushed her chest in and out.
Her slim body made it hard to believe that she had repeatedly executed gravity-defying feats over the course of the game.
"—What?"
For the first time, the girl turned to look at the two of them.
It seemed she hadn't noticed them until now due to her intense concentration during the game.
Her shining eyes stared at the Touya and Homura where they had been standing in wait all this time.
Her gaze was clear and transparent, as if she could see through their values and personality with just that look.
Homura nervously began to speak.
"Umm, are you Inari-san—err, Inari-senpai?"
"Yeah, that's me."
After gulping down a large swig from her sports drink bottle, she spoke up again.
"Are you students from Seiran High?"
"Yes," confirmed Homura.

“I’m—” began Touya.
“Ah, I know that voice. You’re the newbie in the Exploration Club, right?”
Without even looking at him, Inari guessed it right on the mark.
“Yes… I’m Touya Takumi, the one who came to visit your house before…”
Touya was obviously quite uncomfortable as he spoke.
Homura quickly introduced herself as well and continued to speak in Touya’s place.
“We visited your house earlier. And we heard you were here.”
“Heeh… Hmm?”
At that moment, her kick volleyball teammates began to call out to gather together again.
Their words had a peculiar ring. It was a foreign language with a lot of geminate consonants in it.
Inari tilted her head apologetically and then turned around to reply.
“Maaf! Sramattingarjunparagi!”
“”?””
Homura and Touya could only stare in puzzlement at Inari’s words.
“Dadasamasama!”
“Dadasamasama!”
After giving that cheerful salutation(?), the players returned to their practice.
Meanwhile, Inari-senpai picked up her bag from the floor and walked away from the court by herself.
“Inari-senpai, that’s amazing! You’re fluent in foreign languages!?”
Homura couldn’t help but express her amazement.
“No, I don’t understand their language at all. I just vaguely get the meaning. I think it’s a Something-or-other-nesian language.”
Homura’s shoulders slumped in disappointment.
“Eh, but aren’t you a member of that kick volleyball team?”
“No. I just thought it looked fun when I saw them playing during a previous visit here. I sometimes come here and join them. They’re good guys. The nasi goreng they make is also super delicious.”
“Nasi goreng…”
Nasi goreng was an Indonesian fried rice dish.
Perhaps they were a group of chefs who worked at an ethnic restaurant?
“Ah, you also like ethnic cooking, right, Touya-kun?”
“……”
Homura changed the topic as she remembered a previous conversation about that, but Touya wasn’t in the mood to reply to that.
After catching up to Inari and matching her quick pace, Touya spoke up again.
“Do you have some free time after this, Inari-senpai?”
“No.”
“……”
Homura and Touya involuntarily slowed down their pace at those words.

Homura was used to this kind of bluntness from Kujou-san.
Though, of course, that didn't mean that her heart's defences had gone up in accordance…
However, Inari brought her indoor shoes to a halt and turned back to them at that point.
"I still have business to take care of—so how about you guys accompany me?"
The gym's entrance.
Just as they saw Inari reappear at the entrance after briefly going into the changing room, she suddenly broke into a full speed dash.
"Ruuuuun!!!" she shouted to the surprised Homura and Touya, and so, despite not understanding what was going on, they ran with Inari to the nearby bus stop and hopped onto the bus that had just arrived.
They were once more riding on a bus through the city, this time with Inari. For some reason, they sat down on the far back bench of the bus, with Inari in the middle. Homura and Touya wheezed breathlessly as they rode the bus, unaware of their destination.
Inari took out a packed and near-bursting convenience store sack from her bag and put it on her lap, and then began digging into the contents without hesitation.
Inside the sack were—rice balls, sandwiches, jelly drinks, waffles and juice cans. It was a collection of food products that had been chosen haphazardly with no thought given to sweetness, bitterness or nutritional balance. Inari noticed Homura staring at her food.
"Want some?"
Inari offered an energy bar.
Homura was startled by the sudden offer.
The lingering scent distinctive of coming right out of a shower drifted off Inari whenever she moved.
"Ah, in that case, I'll have one!"
Inari gave off a different image with her hair let down.
She had wavy, silky fine hair that looked like it took a lot of time and care to groom.
Homura couldn't help feeling her eyes drawn to the way Inari's hair, still slightly wet due lack of time, bounced up and down with each shake of the bus.
Sitting next to her like this, Homura still couldn't believe that Inari had performed those acrobatic feats earlier with that slender body of hers.
Inari turned around and offered an energy bar to Touya as well.
"How about you?"
"I'm fine… I drank some juice earlier…"
Forgoing any polite words, Touya merely spoke the truth and declined her offer.
Homura desperately tried to signal him through eye contact from outside of Inari's field of vision.

Her telepathy seeming to have gotten through, Touya held out his hand very, very reluctantly.
“…Well… I’ll have one, I guess.”
Inari handed it over by slamming it into his palm.
She then turned back to the sack full of calories in front of her and resumed her intake of nourishment.
“—Moving my body around makes me hungry.”
Actually, Inari mumbled out something like “Harphhoffmerfhangu” as she stuffed her checks with a rice ball, but their ears managed to barely decipher what she meant.
“I’m going to be moving around some more, so I need to refill my energy while I have the chance.”
—Morfheerfgofhoff.
Eh, you’re doing more exercise after all that? Homura and Touya thought simultaneously in surprise.
They tried to ask Inari for specifics, but after she finally swallowed and took a moment to breath, she asked a question of her own.
“Homura, why are you accompanying this guy to see me? Are you part of the student council or something?”
“No, well, I’m also technically… *mumble mumble*… a member… of the Exploration Club.”
“Hmph. So there are two new members this year.”
“That’s right,” said Homura, before remembering something and shaking her head.
“T-There’s one more, you know? There are three first-year members now.”
Right. It’d be a problem if you forgot.
“That’s quite a harvest. I was the only new member last year.”
“I see… is that so?”
Inserting a straw into a carton of apple sauce, Inari turned to look at the scenery outside the window.
“Well, that’s a thing of the past—for me, anyway.”
The three of them got off the bus at the last stop on its route.
“The zoo?”
There lay the most prominent animal natural park in the prefecture.
Homura had visited the place a few times before, but this was the first she’d heard of a sports facility within its grounds.
“—Three tickets with—aaah, aaah—a student discount please—aachoo!”
Inari showed her student ID at the ticket window and purchased their entrance tickets.
When she returned to Homura and Touya, she held out the three tickets like a fan in her hand to the two of them, and they proceeded to take one each.
“Ah, thanks… What’s wrong, senpai?”
Inari was incessantly rubbing at her eyes.
As Homura tilted her head curiously, Inari took out a pollen mask from her bag.

“Senpai, I’ll pay for my own ticket.”
Touya said that and tried to give her money in exchange for the ticket, but Inari didn’t listen and just pushed her way past into the zoo grounds.
Touya and Homura had no choice but to follow after her, like secondary characters in the protagonist’s team.
Inari led them through the zoo without giving a single side glance as they passed by an Indian elephant pair of parent and child, a black rhinoceros, an army of mountain monkeys, a napping capybara, a flock of flamingos and a Malayan tapir.
All the while, she sneezed several times underneath her mask.
Homura’s curiosity was piqued by Inari’s sudden sneezing, but her interest was also aroused by the surrounding animals since this was her first visit here in a long while.
“Uugh… rabbits… frogs… guinea pigs…”
Meanwhile, a certain person among them was painfully reluctant as they passed by the corner for petting small animals…
When they reached a space surrounded by high walls, they found a bluish-white pool modeled after the appearance of icebergs found in the polar seas.
There was a popular booth there for looking down at the zoo’s polar bears.
Polar bear—a type of bear with a white fur coat.
There were two polar bears that were roaming freely inside the pool area.
Inari clung to the stainless and transparent acrylic fence as she stood on her tiptoes to look around the vast pool excitedly.
However, it was clear from the way she didn’t stop searching with her red-swollen eyes that her target wasn’t the two bears below.
“Uugh… he’s not out today…”
She groaned in obvious disappointment.
Homura worried gazed at Inari-senpai from the side.
“Senpai—are you okay?”
“I’b hiine… I’b… hiine…”
…She really didn’t look fine.
Her fingers waved through the air dizzily as if looking for something.
Understanding, Touya handed her a pocket tissue, and she blew her nose.
“Senpai…”
“Could it be…”
““You’re allergic to animals?””
The person in question immediately denied her juniors’ accusation.
“No. It’s because of the pollen in the air.”
“……”
“……”
And then she started sneezing again. It seemed to be quite a serious case.
Homura pitifully tried to run with the obvious lie.
“…Yeah, it’s pretty bad… There’s a lot of hairy pollen here…”
Inari nodded with another sneeze.

Though she didn't reveal it on the outside, Homura was quite taken aback on the inside. Touya probably felt the same.
Homura recalled how, during a previous expedition on Nutella when they'd found tracks of what appeared to be wild animals, Misasagi-senpai had said that Inari Sunao would be able to distinguish what animals they were from in more detail.
And yet, this inexplicable difference. To think she'd be allergic to animals…
As they stood there, a male animal caretaker wearing leather boots entered the animal grounds.
He stood on an elevated platform above the pool and threw down several fish from the basket he carried.
The polar bears threw their huge bodies into the water with a splash and swam around to gulp down the fish one after another.
"Polar bears sure are good at swimming."
Touya mumbled in amazement.
"That's right. Touya-kun, is this your first time coming here to the zoo?"
"No, but the last time I came was a long time ago."
"…Ah… I see."
At that point, the caretaker heard Inari's sneezing and turned to look over at them.
After finishing up feeding the polar bears, the man returned to the caretaker hut. At the same time, Inari came down from the fence and began to move.
"Hmm? Senpai?"
"Follow me."
She walked to the caretaker hut within the iceberg.
She led them to the staff entrance inside that was forbidden to visitors, and at that point the man from earlier came out from the door.
"Hello, Sunao-chan. Welcome."
Inari bowed her head politely.
Unaware of the man's relationship with Inari, Homura and Touya just followed her lead and bowed as well.
"So you brought friends along? And not the usual Neyakawa-san either. Technically, only authorized people are allowed to enter, but…"
The man looked at Homura and Touya with a slightly troubled face.
The nametag on his chest read "Kitoro". Quite an odd name.
"These guys are… my juniors from… the Exploration Club at school."
"Hoh!"
When Inari mumbled her reply beneath her mask, the man's eyes lit up.
"Then I'll make a special exception."
Beckoned by him, the three of them went through the staff entrance.
When they entered the caretaker hut, the smell in the air became quite pungent, and the room temperature was also lower.

It was a cave-like place you'd expect within an artificial iceberg. It resembled the atmosphere of the Exploration Club's building with its few windows.
Touya looked around curiously from the rear of the group, while Homura suddenly spoke up.
"Ah…"
Homura stared at a polar bear that was sitting down inside the breeding pen within the hut and rocking its body back and forth.
There was a sliver of innocence lingering in its appearance. It was a cub that had grown to the point where it was almost as big as an adult polar bear.
"Pole… is that Pole? He's grown so big!" shouted Homura in surprise.
Yes, the cub's name was Pole.
Homura recalled the polar bear cub, who she had completely forgotten about until now.
When she had visited the zoo in the past, she had seen him in the special glass-walled breeding pen, though he'd been as small as a teddy bear back then.
The caretaker nodded.
"Yeah, he's gotten quite big. His weight is now two hundred and twenty-five kilos."
Homura was shocked by that number, but Inari's expression sank.
"He's thinned out a lot… Pole!"
At Inari's call, Pole let out a cry and approached them.
He pressed his nose against the breeding pen's lattice barred door, clearly agitated.
"Wait, just wait a sec, Pole."
Inari was also agitated. She turned to the caretaker with a pleading expression.
"Kitoro-san, I'm sorry to ask this, but please."
"Yeah—You know the place, right?"
As soon as she accepted a key with a tag attached from the man's hand, Inari headed down a nearby hallway at a small sprint, leaving Homura and Touya behind.
"What, senpai?"
By the time Homura turned around, Inari was already gone.
Meanwhile, Touya expressed his gratitude to the man once more.
"Thank you very much, Kitoro-san. I'm truly grateful for this opportunity, but is it really all right… to let us in back here?"
"Aren't Exploration Club members accustomed to bears and other animals?"
Touya and Homura both furiously shook their heads.
Kitoro-san smiled at how synchronized they were.
"This place isn't really kept off-limits to guests. It's quite common for elementary and middle school students to come here as part of a workplace

experience visit. Well, due to certain circumstances, it might be bad if this was revealed on the net. But since you're Exploration Club members…"
As he spoke, Kitoro-san kept his ears pricked towards the hallway.
The sound of a locker door loudly opening and closing echoed through the halls, and Inari returned soon after.
Her changed appearance was so strange that Homura retreated several steps back to the wall.
"All right, I'm ready to go!"
It wasn't until she clapped together her mitten-covered hands and let out a muffled yet spirited shout from beneath the huge goggles and mask covering her face that Homura realized that *that* was Inari-senpai… or rather, an actual human being.
She was covered from top to bottom in white protective clothing, like those used by a bomb disposal professional.
Inari, who had turned from a small and slender girl into a short and stout Michelin mascot, walked over to stand dauntingly in front of the door to the breeding pen—
Homura, no longer able to contain herself, burst out laughing.
"Fu, bu, ahahahaha! Senpai, that outfit is too much, ahahahaha!"
"You really have no tact, laughing like that… buh…"
Though he chided her, Touya also had his face turned away as his body trembled minutely.
Not paying her juniors any mind, Inari earnestly devoted herself to her warm-up stretches.
After Homura and Touya moved back at Kitoro-san's urging, the white baggy lump slid open the door to the breeding pen and leapt inside with her safety boots.
—Eh?
As Homura clutched her sides and gasped for air from laughing too much, Touya's thoughts came to a halt.
Furthermore, Kitoro-san went to close the pen door behind Inari.
Eh? Eh!?
Inside the pen, the polar bear cub (though he had grown to being two hundred and twenty-five kilos at this point) let out a cry and leapt forward to greet Inari.
Inari's joyous voice (and occasional sneezing) ran through the breeding pen.
"Ahaha, ahahahaha, Pole, Pole, Po—"
Inari happily hugged Pole around his long neck, but the cub's excitement caused her to be shaken off and sent flying.
She rolled across the ground like a bowling ball before slamming into the door with a loud bang.
"Ouch! That hurt!"
Despite the anger in her voice, Inari immediately sprang up and leapt forward to hug Pole again.

At this point, Homura finally understood what was going on, and she stiffened in the midst of her laughter.
“……No way…”
“W-What the heck is she…? Kintaro[2]?”
“Well, she often says ‘I do sumo wrestling training in order to deal with bears♪’, though I can’t say whether it’s true or not,” said Kitoro-san.
“Wait, why did it sound like there was a music note symbol at the end there—?”
“That’s not the issue here! Senpai’s going to die! Like being wrung through a dryer!”
“I suppose.”
Homura turned pale at the caretaker’s carefree response.
When Homura turned back at the sound of laughter swishing around this way and that, she saw the terrifying sight of Pole holding up Inari by the scruff of her neck with his mouth and swinging her around.
“Hey, let me go, LET ME GO! Oraaaaah!”
It might sound nice to call it friendly skinship, but it just looked like a struggle of strength and violence.
When Inari rubbed her cheeks against Pole, she was blown away with a punch; when she jumped onto his back, Pole rolled over and squashed her with his body—
But even then, Inari didn’t give up and wrapped both her legs in a crab hold around Pole’s neck to bend him back off her, and then she used the nearby wall as a foothold to jump off and delivered a kick… the whole thing was completely ridiculous.
If Homura entered this petting corner (on hard mode), she would definitely turn into a pool of blood within ten seconds. The pure white and fluffy polar bear, in contrast to his teddy bear-like appearance, had sharp fangs and a terrifying deep bluish tongue, truly a wild beast.
“That cute Pole is now…”
“Amazing… they’re both ridiculously lively.”
“Well, they’ll stop once they get tired.”
Kitoro-san sat down on a nearby toolbox.
He basically left the situation as is in the breeding pen, which was resounding with indistinguishable shouts that weren’t quite screams or laughter.
Though she was still worried about Inari’s safety, Homura suddenly wondered what that girl, Suzuran, would do in this situation.
She could easily imagine that girl, who had dashed through wild mountains on the back of a giant white wolf, would play with Pole just as energetically and roughly as Inari-senpai.
“…Does senpai come here a lot?”
Choosing to turn her eyes away from the bout of fierce skinship for a moment, Homura questioned Kitoro-san.
“Yeah. And Saho-kun from the same Exploration Club comes often as well.”

“Saho-kun… Ah, you mean Akiho-kun from Hiyoshizaka High?”
Kitoro-san nodded.
After the incident with Subaru-hime, Homura’s Exploration Club from Seiran High had gone to visit Hiyoshizaka High’s Exploration Club to express their thanks for their help back then.
During that visit, they’d been introduced to one of the new male members of the Hiyoshi Exploration Club, Saho Akiho.
He was a Nutella investigator rookie just like Homura.
Touya, who had been intently watching the interspecies hand-to-hand combat show being played out on the other side of the lattice bars, turned around at those words.
“Wait… you mean Saho does the same thing as senpai is doing right now…?”
“Ahahaha, the only one who can do this is Sunao-chan. Sunao-chan is a specialist in dealing with Pole. Saho-kun has been a regular visitor to this zoo even before he joined the Exploration Club. He’s such a steadfast visitor that we even inform him whenever an animal here is unwell.”
“Heh. I’m a bit surprised.”
“Oh, is that so?”
Saho was quite the unique character.
After Homura exchanged email addresses with him during their first meeting, he kept messaging her all the time, to the point where it got too much and Fujimori-sensei and Koma-senpai both had to give him a lecture. Though, that was mostly because Homura always burst out laughing every time she read his messages and wasn’t able to concentrate on her training and after-school studies as a result.
“Sunao-chan wasn’t able to come play with Pole for a while, which made him quite sad… It was only last month that she was able to start coming here regularly again.”
“…Last month? Then, before that…”
Touya moved to stand next to Kitoro-san with his back against the wall. Exchanging a look with Touya, Homura meekly asked the question on their minds.
“Could you tell us more about it…?”
“Sure. It’s not a topic she’d get angry over being talked about,” said Kitoro-san in consent.
“—You know that she was hospitalized for a while, right? Sunao-chan didn’t have any appetite for a long time. She was thin like a twig and lost weight to the point where I could even pick her up with a single hand.”
“No appetite… you mean anorexia?” asked Touya.
Kitoro-san nodded.
“But she still pushed her body to come see Pole. The worst was when she was in a wheelchair. Naturally, there was no way I could permit her to enter the breeding pen in that state. After she worked hard to regain her strength, she finally got permission to go in starting last month.”

“I’m not sure… that can be called safe even in her current state…”
—Behind them, they could hear the thuds and bangs of a fierce wrestling battle.
Smiling wryly at Homura’s honest amazement, Kitoro-san continued speaking.
“It was really a tough time. Pole is quite the difficult child himself. He’s managed to become accustomed to this environment, but his physical condition still turns bad frequently. I’d like it if Pole learned from Sunao-chan’s rehab and returned to full health as well… Those two are like siblings, an older sister and her younger brother.”
“Siblings?” questioned Touya.
“Well, if I remember right, Pole was taken in from the wild in some foreign country—” said Homura as she recalled the explanation panels she’d seen the last time she’d visited the special breeding pen.
“Taken in… so he was really born in the wild?” asked Touya.
“That’s right. Pole wasn’t born here, or even in another zoo in a foreign country—”
“……”
Hearing that, Homura couldn’t help but recall Suzuran.
After recovering from a brief period of physical debility, Suzuran had safely returned to her mother.
Was she doing well now? Was she feeling lonely in Japan without the wolves she had been raised together with like siblings?
A life filled with things she wasn’t accustomed to awaited her here in Japan.
With so many things for Suzuran to learn, Homura had been told to leave her be as much as possible in order to give her time to foster bonds with her new family, but… Homura still worried about the girl.
“The truth is, the one who picked up Pole when he was still a newborn was Sunao-chan’s father, while he was collecting data in the Artic. You should ask her father for the details. In the end, Pole ended up living at the Inari home until it was decided we would take him in here and he adjusted to the new environment. That’s why they’re like siblings.”
“But what about Inari-senpai’s animal allergies…!?” asked Homura in surprise.
“Strangely enough, her symptoms are weaker when she’s with Pole.”
“What?”
“I can’t believe it…”
A certain scene appeared in Homura’s mind.
A cub that was just a bundle of cuteness happily chasing after a young Inari.
The girl gently rubbing cheeks with the cub as he dozed at her bedside.
Homura switched Inari with herself in that scene and played with the cub in her imagination.
It was enough to make her mouth water.
“I wish I could have had a fluffy white bear young brother instead of a cheeky and mean younger sister…”

“Hey… you shouldn’t say such rash things even as a joke…”
Touya drew back from her.
“You wouldn’t be able to do a no-holds-barred wrestling match against a teddy bear that had grown into a lump of meat and muscle like that……
Hmm?”
As they were talking, they realized that the breeding pen had turned quiet.
As first Touya then Homura noticed it, they nervously went to peek through the door, wondering if the match had been settled in some terrible and tragic fashion.
“……”
“……They’re sleeping.”
At some point, Inari and Pole had fallen asleep while hugging each other.
They lay there piled together as their chests gently moved up and down.
For the next short while, the three of them merely silently watched the big younger brother and small older sister’s brief respite.
Evening.
The three students were now sitting in a corner of a Freshness Burger restaurant.
After leaving the zoo, Homura and the others had returned to Honmachi station.
They’d given their thanks to Kitoro-san for having taken the time to let them visit while he was busy, and then taken the bus route back home.
Inari, who had been sleepy and absentminded for a while, had now pulled through a complete one-eighty and was sitting with her arms folded like an imposing commander before the troops of hamburgers lined up on the table.
It was an impressive resource operation that sampled every part of the menu.
“Sorry for dragging you guys around today. You’re both hungry, right? Go ahead and eat.”
Homura gulped.
There was no way she could refuse when her thoughts were already slowed from hunger.
“Is that all right? In that case, I’ll have the chicken burger.”
Homura reached for it without hesitation.
“Even so, Pole was really cute today. His teeth were a bit scary… but his sleeping face is still just like that of an innocent child!”
Inari giggled and nodded giddily with slightly blushing cheeks.
While drinking her orange tea, she noticed that Touya hadn’t moved to grab any food, so she advanced the Great Hamburger Army towards him with a push.
“You eat some too, Touya Takumi. Or do you dislike hamburgers?”
“There’s no such thing as a male high school student who dislikes cola and hamburgers.”
Homura spoke teasingly, while Touya looked at her annoyingly.
“I think there are plenty of guys like that, though.”

“Here.”
Inari forcefully handed Touya a double-decker burger, the biggest one of the lot.
It was true that he was feeling hungry too, so Touya gave in and thanked Inari for the food.
After letting out a humph, Inari reached for the nearest burger to her.
“Is Pole always in that breeding pen?”
“No… but he still needs to be watched carefully. They let him roam outside as much as possible. But, according to the veterinarian, there seems to be an abnormality in his brain…”
Homura’s face turned grave at those words, but Inari waved her hands to break the mood.
“But he’s gradually getting better. It’s all right, there’s no need to worry.”
“I hope he gets to play around lots outside soon.”
“He will. And very soon too.”
Relieved by Inari’s reassurance, Homura then asked a question.
“Inari-senpai, you traveled around the world when you were a kid, right? Your father showed us photos from back then.”
“Yeah. Though rather than traveled, it’s more like I lived wherever we went, for months at a time. America, the Amazon, Asian mountains and grasslands, the Polynesian jungle, and even Antarctica. We apparently went to lots of other places too, though I don’t really remember some of them.”
The pictures of Inari in the photo album, when she was still a little girl who hadn’t developed her animal allergies.
She’d played with lion cubs, been licked by leopards while she cried, had owls rest on her head, slept peacefully while leaning against a giant lizard…
“There were lots of interesting photos of animals. So, did you join the Exploration Club because of your father’s influence?”
“I didn’t join just because I liked animals. Though it’s true that I’m used to outdoor activities in the wild.”
“Then what made you join the club?” asked Touya.
The interior of a hamburger restaurant wasn’t the ideal place for the discussion about the Exploration Club that Touya wanted to have, but fortunately there were no other customers near them.
“That’s what you want to ask about? I was pulled in by Mori-chan and the club president.”
“Ah, the first club president? I still haven’t met them.”
“…What about Misasagi-senpai?” asked Touya suspiciously.
“Mayo…? She didn’t seem all that eager about me joining the club.”
“Eh?”
Homura unconsciously cried out in surprise, while Touya’s expression turned confused beside her.
“Well, of course. After all, I didn’t really have any special skills or knowledge, and I’m even allergic to *pollen*. Even my IE Response was below average.”

Inari's answer was probably an accurate assessment, but to Homura it merely looked like modesty.
"B-But Misasagi-senpai was really fervent when she invited me to the club. W-Well, she did mostly do stuff behind the scenes to get me to join that I never saw myself, though. In the first place, don't you have excellent reflexes, Inari-senpai? Your talents are much more suited to the Exploration Club than someone who's just for show like me!"
"That's… like I said…"
As her words faltered, Inari's hand hung in the air uncertainly while holding her burger.
"Enough! We didn't come here to talk about this!" said Inari belligerently as she turned to look at Touya and munched on her burger defiantly. "So, what is it you want to tell me!?"
"Please come back to the Exploration Club, Inari-senpai."
"Did Mayo put you up to this?"
"No. I came to talk to you by my own will."
"What, so this is a confession? 'I need you' and all that?"
"Like we said before, our club currently has four members, but only three can actually go on expeditions right now, and Misasagi-senpai is the only experienced member. The only one. Without you, we won't be able to maintain our club activities, Inari-senpai."
"……"
Glaring at Touya, Inari silently scarfed down the bacon omelet burger in her hand. And after she finished it, she immediately grabbed another one, this time a bitter-looking salsa burger, and she bit into it without even properly looking at it and aggressively pushed it down her throat.
Homura frowned at this gluttony that was clearly bad for digestion, but Inari's gaze remained fixed on Touya, and Touya stared straight back at her as well.
After a final gulp, Inari spoke up.
"'We won't be able to maintain our club activities'~? That's quite the model answer. The kind of boring answer that anyone would think."
Taking the paper napkin Homura offered to wipe her mouth, Inari continued talking.
"Hmph. I don't care about your official stance. Tell me what you really think. Did you come here just to talk with me cordially?"
"…!"
Touya faltered for an instant, but immediately resolved himself and spoke.
"Because the club needs you, Inari-senpai. It's not an official stance or anything like that. We can't leave Misasagi-senpai all by herself. And I—"
Looking at him straight on, Inari urged him to continue with an unwavering, serious gaze.
"I can't stand the idea of you just leaving the Exploration Club because you decided it was boring and worthless."
"So you want to one-up me for that?"

“Oh, as expected of a kendo boy[3],” said Homura with a clap. However—
“Do you feel the same way?”
“Eh, me? Err—”
Homura was bewildered from suddenly having the focus shifted to her. Homura herself merely went with the flow and came because it seemed fun… But it would be hard to say that in this atmosphere. Instead, she voiced the words that she suddenly recalled at that moment.
“U-Um, what did you mean by ‘Don’t get deeply involved with the Exploration Club’…?”
“Hmm? What’s that?”
“You said those words to me before. Don’t you remember, Inari-senpai?” said Touya.
“……I guess… I did.”
Inari tilted her head to look up at the ceiling fan above.
Meanwhile, Homura readjusted herself.
“You and Misasagi-senpai helped each other over the course of a year of club activities, right? It seems a waste just to abandon all that teamwork. And we have problems of our own. The base camp you and senpai made was destroyed.”
“Tch.”
Did she really just say “Tch”?
It was the Exploration Club’s home, which Inari herself had definitely played a part in building and yet…
Spurred by Inari’s disrespectful attitude, Homura’s words involuntarily turned overeager.
“A-And also! We made an amazing discovery! If you heard about it, you’d definitely want to come back.”
Touya obviously moved to try and stop her impertinent words, but it was too late.
“……”
Staring back at Homura, Inari folded her arms and spoke.
“You discovered Nutellans?”
The correct answer was yes.
But even so—
“Ahahaha, who knows? In any case, it’s definitely an amazing… discovery…”
Though her heart had nearly jumped up her throat at Inari’s unexpected response, Homura did her best to give a flat reaction. But it became obvious that her efforts were completely meaningless when she looked beside her.
Touya wore a stiff and astonished expression. That alone made the truth obvious, but he was even bending back to check their surroundings in a blatant manner. There were still as of yet no other customers besides the three of them in the restaurant.
“What, so you came to tell me something like that…?”
Inari stretched back and sighed in exasperation, but she was also nonchalantly checking over their surroundings.

“Hey, Touya-kun…”
“No, but I couldn’t help it…”
Homura had already known that he was terrible at hiding things, so this was really her own fault in the end.
But even so, Homura felt that Inari’s calm attitude was too odd.
“Inari-senpai… did you already know…?”
Homura lowered her voice and leaned forward over the table.
Homura’s Exploration Club group from Seiran High had encountered a previously unknown resident of Nutella, a woman who was half-Nutellan and half-Earthling called Princess Iotsumisumaru.
How could she stay so composed towards such shocking news that was just as earth-shattering as humanity first encountering aliens?
Ignoring Homura’s fears and suspicions, Inari leaned back in her chair and uninterestedly sipped from her drink.
“You guys… haven’t been taught anything. Mayo’s really making light of you.”
“……”
Even if she was their senpai, Homura couldn’t hide the irritation she felt at that contemptuous attitude. She sprang up from her chair to protest, but was interrupted as Touya spoke up, having shaken off his initial agitation first.
“Yes, it’s true that we’re still inexperienced,” said Touya, in a calm voice that kept his anger well in check. “But senpai always kindly instructs and guides us.”
“Well, of course, obviously Mayo would teach you whatever’s convenient for her.”
Inari waved her hand with a scoff.
“In that case… please train us too, Inari-senpai. Please teach us. If we do something dangerous, please go ahead and scold us.”
When Homura said that, Touya widened his eyes in a slightly joking manner.
“To think I’d hear something like that from Hinooka…”
“Hey, Touya-kun.”
Inari’s expression softened a little as she watched the two of them bicker, but her decision didn’t change.
“Mayo is mistaken. Until that stubborn fool realizes that, I absolutely will not return to the Exploration Club.”
“‘Stubborn fool’… Look who’s talking…”
Homura didn’t know the reason why Inari was so resolute in her stance. But Homura felt that, even if she persistently questioned Inari about it here and now, it would just drive her further away and the atmosphere between them would just turn even more perilous.
Touya also didn’t get overeager and chose to remain patient.
“I won’t give up. I’ll come see you again.”

“Do as you wish. But enough with the formal visits. In the first place, I’ll be attending school starting next semester. You can meet me normally there, you know?”
“I see. That’s true.”
And when Homura imagined Misasagi-senpai and Inari-senpai encountering each other at school, she felt unbearable at the thought of what that meeting would be like.
Inari put the remaining hamburgers on a tray.
“Thanks for the food. Senpai… what are you doing with that?”
“I ordered too much after all. You can take as much as you want with you.”
Inari pushed the heavy tray into Homura’s hands.
“Hmm, in that case, why don’t we divide it up between us? Senpai, how much will you take?”
“I’ve… ugh… had enough.”
Inari painfully held her stomach.
“There’s no such thing as a female high school student who dislikes hamburgers. Here, have one.”
Homura grinned.
“No… like I said… Fine, give me whichever. I can’t even taste it at this point.”
“Then here’s the newly sold Tandoori chicken burger. I’ll have this one and this one. And I’ll leave the remainder to Touya. I don’t like blue cheese~”
“Yeah, yeah. I saw this coming.”
They walked down the side road through the park in front of the station as the sun began to set.
Homura and Touya were headed to the station. Inari was headed to the bus stop in front of the station.
With the short-statured Inari in the lead, the three of them walked together down the short path to the station.
“By the way, I have some advice for you as your unreliable senpai who skipped school.”
As they were about to part ways, Inari pointed a finger at the two of them.
“The media is going to start taking action in full force soon. Pay attention to your surroundings. You guys are definitely going to be checked out by them. And not just the media. Watch out for each other so that you guys don’t get dragged into any violent incidents.
“That’s nothing really new for the club, and Misasagi-senpai has already warned us about precisely that.”
“I see.”
Inari turned away sullenly after hearing Touya’s blunt reply.
Smiling bitterly, Homura tried to change the mood by speaking up.
“It was like that today too, but it’s hard to keep in mind that we’re involved with state classified secrets… Touya-kun, maybe Inari-senpai found out about *it* thanks to her father’s intel sources?”

“Eh… Has the media’s net already reached that far?” asked Touya as he turned to Inari.
“Hmph, who knows? I’m no longer a club member, so I don’t know that much. But you’ll probably find out soon, even if you don’t want to.”
With her back still turned, Inari spoke in an insinuating manner. Even so, Homura felt a faint, unpleasant shiver.
And then, just as she was about to leave, their senpai’s unyielding attitude that had lasted up until now faded away, and Inari Sunao turned to face them with the expression of a forlorn-looking girl.
“Touya Takumi—Hinooka Homura—”
Her following words were probably the one small piece of advice that she truly wanted to tell them.
“—Don’t let yourselves be misled by the impression that Nutella is the only reality.”
Chapter 2 END

KICK VOLLEY REHAB

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) A saying by the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius.

(2) Kintaro: a hero in Japanese folklore, known for having befriended animals and possessing superhuman strength.

(3) The phrase Inari uses here originally refers to taking points against an opponent in kendo, but it is often used as a metaphor equivalent to the English phrase “one-up someone”.

Chapter 3

Tokyo International Airport, popularly known as Haneda Airport. Departure lobby.
“Yay! Airplane, yay! Haneda, yay!”
“In-flight meal, yay! Altitude of forty-thousand feet, yay!”
Having gathered at the meeting place beneath the lobby’s clock, Homura and Ameno shared a high-five with brimming smiles on their faces.
Homura had left her house early this morning and dozed off while taking the train, nearly forgetting to take her carry-on luggage as she got off, but she’d grown excited the moment she arrived at the airport.
Meanwhile, Touya was watching the two high-spirited girls in exasperation when he heard someone approach.
“Yo. Good work on leading the sleepyhead Homura here.”
“Good, morning.”
Fujimori-sensei and club president Misasagi had arrived to join up with them, making all of Seiran High’s Exploration Club members present and accounted for.
“Good morning, Fujimori-sensei, Misasagi-senpai.”
Touya greeted them in a raised voice so as to be clearly heard in the noisy lobby, filled with so many people going on trips for summer vacation.
Fujimori-sensei, who had just called Homura a sleepyhead, let out a big yawn herself.
“…It looks like you guys had to work late on the presentation materials, senpai, sensei.”
“Pretty much~”
As Fujimori lightly sat down on her British travel bag, Misasagi bowed her head at her.
“Thank you, for all your, hard work.”
“No, no, I’m the one who should be saying that. You even helped me finish my work in addition to the rest of your workload.”
“It, concerns us, after all.”
“True. But maybe I should have gotten the first-years to help too.”
“I offered to help from the start, you know,” Touya pointed out.
“But that’s, you know…” said Fujimori as she averted her gaze, looking as if she was holding back from saying something.
In the direction she turned towards, Homura and Ameno were encamped in front of a wide lookout window and were letting out excited shouts at the landing and taking-off jet planes.
“What’s with those two? Do they think we’re going to Okinawa[1] or something?”
“We ARE going to Okinawa.”

Touya spoke empathically in an exasperated tone, while Misasagi giggled.
Homura's outfit consisted of a Hawaiian shirt and denim hot pants with lace design, the stereotypical clothing of an enthusiastic vacationer. And Ameno wasn't wearing her usual boyish clothes, but instead had on a sailor dress with a refreshing-looking wide collar and ribbon as accents.
Ameno's dress in particular was the result of Fujimori saying "I don't really care what kind of street clothes you wear" because she found it a hassle and giving Ameno her wallet, after which Ameno and Homura had gone shopping around boutiques in Honmachi before the club trip.
Ameno was acting embarrassed since she wasn't used to these clothes yet, while Homura was acting lively and ready to go beside her. Their outfits, though a complete contrast to each other, looked good on both of them.
Fujimori looked at Touya with a suggestive sidelong glance.
"…What?"
"Just trying to guess what you're secretly thinking. Probably something like 'I'm so disappointed that Misasagi-senpai is wearing her school uniform as usual!', right?"
"Eh, hah?"
"'What a waste, even though it's summer vacation'… something along those lines?"
"I'm, sorry…"
"Wait, senpai! There's nothing for you to apologize for. You have the important job of doing the presentation, so you have to dress like a proper student. Sensei, please don't tease us like that."
"Yes, I'm very sorry. Ah, you all have carry-on luggage, huh? Then I'll go take care of our check-in. You guys wait over there."
Fujimori headed toward the reception desk while pulling her suitcase in tow.
After she left, Touya turned to ask Misasagi a question.
"You've already been to Okinawa, right, senpai?"
"Yes. I've been there several times, for training."
"Ah, and this is the third time the Exploration Club meeting is being held there too, right?"
Misasagi nodded, but then suddenly looked down at her bag. It was a leather carry-on bag that appeared to have been used a lot.
"…I also, brought a dress, you know? For the friendly, get-together, just in case."
Misasagi whispered as if revealing a secret, startling Touya.
"Eh… but it's a gathering of high school students, right? I brought my uniform like I was told, but no formal wear like that…"
"People from, the UN HQ, will also, be coming, and besides… I can't afford, to lose to, the others, either."
Senpai whispered in an enthusiastic tone, apparently just as excited as Homura and the others.

On the other hand, Homura and Ameno were still chatting happily by the window.
“I couldn’t sleep yesterday after I finished helping the club president and Chiayu-san~”
“Me too! This is my first time visiting Okinawa. I’m really looking forward to it.”
Ameno’s words were an obvious fib—at least the part about lacking sleep.
“I couldn’t wait and ended up putting on my swimsuit before coming here,” boasted Ameno. “Fufufu, it’s brand new! Akado-san from the research lab chose it for me—”
“Ah, even I have to admit that’s a bit too hasty. We haven’t even arrived there yet. Wait, wait, don’t show it to me here!”
Homura frantically stopped Ameno as she casually lifted the hem of her skirt. It was at that moment—
“I also put it on. Just wait a sec.”
A long-haired boy suddenly showed up and walked over to them.
“Wha, Akiho-kun? You pervert, stop! Geez~, don’t do that without warning right off the bat in the morning.”
The boy who had suddenly showed up beside them and started to undo his belt was Saho Akiho.
He was a first year member of the Hiyoshizaka High Exploration Club, whose name had just come up the other day at the zoo.
“Good morning, Akiho-san. If I remember correctly, the members from Hiyoshizaka High are taking the same flight as us, right?”
“Really? Nice. But man, Seiran High is really loose and lenient.”
“Loose? How so?” asked Homura curiously.
“Our club is making us all come wearing our uniforms, and just when we finally get to go on a vacation trip to the south. It’s way too plain—Ah, morning, Takumi-kun.”
“Yeah, morning… Wait, why is your belt undone, Saho.”
“No, you see, I’m showing off my new swimsuit…”
After Touya came over to greet him, Saho began to resume undressing.
“Like I said, think of the time and place!”
Homura shouted with a strained smile.
Behind her, the other Hiyoshizaka Exploration Club members appeared together as a group and approached them.
The most noticeable one was the giant vice-president, Taga Taichi-senpai. In front of him was the president, Kamikoma Sora, carrying an instrument case on her shoulder and wearing a wide brimmed hat and sunglasses in a strange combination. She lifted off her hat and threw it casually at Misasagi in place of a greeting. The hat spun threw the air and landed perfectly on Misasagi’s head.
Behind the front two followed three other Exploration Club members, each of them in a different year. With the club advisor included, the Hiyoshizaka High Exploration Club consisted of a total of seven people.

Fujimori-sensei, having returned from checking in at the counter, went to join up with her fellow teacher Tanakura Hirosuke from Hiyoshizaka.
“So everyone’s here now!”
“…Yeah.”
Ameno commented excitedly, while Touya merely nodded in agreement.
He was quietly gazing over the circle of Exploration Club members gathered, with the two club presidents at the center.
……Touya-kun?
But Homura had seen his expression stiffen a little when the group from Hiyoshizaka arrived. He seemed to have been looking at Kamikoma-senpai, or perhaps Taga.
His expression, which looked sad and lonely somehow, was surely the result of thinking about the person who should have been here—Inari-senpai, who should have been standing by Misasagi-senpai’s side.
When both Homura and Touya became a bit quiet after that, Saho gave them a push to the back and hurried them on impatiently.
“Come on, it’s time to depart! I’m really looking forward to it, the Exploration Club Summer Assembly!”
Inside the plane bound from Haneda, Tokyo, to Naha, Okinawa.
A short while after the plane took off, the seat belt sign turned off.
When it was permitted to use electronic devices, Homura secretly took out her terminal.
She wanted to recheck the pamphlet she’d downloaded to her terminal earlier.
“Are you, looking at, the SA^{2} program, schedule?”
Sitting next to her, Misasagi asked that, guessing the purpose of Homura’s actions.
“Ah… Sorry. Like I thought, is it bad to look at it here…?”
“It’s, fine. As long as, you do it, stealthily.”
Misasagi put a finger to her lips conspiratorially.
Relieved by those words, Homura began to pretend to read an inflight magazine while actually looking at the screen of the terminal wedged inside.
The Exploration Club’s customary summer event, the “Summer Assembly”, was a huge meeting where all the clubs throughout the country gathered together.
Meetings were frequently held on the district level or between club presidents, but the Summer Assembly was the only time when all Nutellan investigators of every rank gathered together.
Government-owned lodging facilities were located next to the huge training field on Iriomote Island.
The assembly was held at those facilities over the course of four days and three nights.
During the course of the assembly, various programs were held, starting with a meeting with all club members in attendance to introduce the new

members this year, followed by individual presentations, discussion panels, performances to demonstrate one's skill as an investigator, hands-on workshops, and other such events.
And of course, there would be a party known as the friendly get-together!
Additionally, volunteer members could borrow small conferences rooms during their free time and work in independent subcommittees. Therefore, the online program schedule had continuously changed and updated at a dizzying pace right up until their departure.
At first, Homura had been nervous about being thrust into such an academic atmosphere that she'd never experienced before, but when she discovered attention-grabbing phrases such as [Eat delicious food native to Nutella!] and [Showcase of 33 fashionable female Exploration Club uniform sets], she found herself getting interested in it.
"It's just like a festival…"
Homura concluded thus while reading through the pamphlet.
Meanwhile, at the seats across the aisle from Homura and Misasagi.
Next to Touya who was sitting on the aisle seat, Ameno was still full of excitement since takeoff.
"By the way, did you not go through the security gate, Ameno?"
"That's right. I used a slightly underhanded trick."
"Underhanded trick?"
During the pre-boarding security check, Ameno had temporarily separated from Touya and the others and headed to the priority lane used for special cases like people in wheelchairs while accompanied by Fujimori-sensei.
"Fufufufu, look at this. It's a special permit signed by the National Transport Minister!"
Ameno took out a passport from her breast pocket.
Touya nodded in understanding. Meanwhile, Fujimori, sitting on the other seat next to Ameno, sighed.
"…It would have been cheaper to just bring her as checked baggage instead of buying her ticket, though…"
Ameno thrust the permit right in front of Fujimori's face with a pout.
"There you go saying that kind of discriminatory remark, Chiayu-san~. That would make me cry, you know? I'd be hugging my knees with tears in my eyes as I came out on the bag claim conveyer belt, you know?"
"Hahaha, that would be a heartrending sight. Actually, it'd probably shock the other travelers."
Showing no interest in Touya's remark there, Fujimori let out another yawn.
"Just don't cause any strange disturbances, okay? Fortunately, that idiot Saho is sitting in the seat way over there, but still…"
With those final words, she put on an eye mask and went to sleep.
Just as Fujimori had pointed out, the Hiyoshizaka club members were seated further ahead, far enough away that Touya and the others here couldn't see them. Touya himself was a bit disappointed by that, though.

“Chiayu-san really fell asleep fast. Even though we’re flying through the stratosphere at nine hundred kilometers per hour. Ah, flying through the air at fifty degrees below the freezing point, in a swimsuit!”
Ameno was acting restless again.
“By the way… Is the inflight meal not being served yet?”
“Huh? There’s no inflight meal, don’t you know?”
“Eh!?” Ameno stiffened with her mouth open in shock.
“It’s only going to take around three hours to get to our destination—wait, you don’t need to eat in the first place, right?”
“That’s true, but I can still taste to a degree, you know? …Besides, I was looking forward to watching everyone hungrily eating a meal in the sky…”
“You have some pretty weird interests.”
After tiring of reading through the program schedule, Homura shut off her terminal and took out a book. It was a guidebook of Iriomote Island she’d bought at a book store. The front cover featured the cartoonish image of an Iriomote wildcat with glittering eyes.
It turned out that the Exploration Club’s lodging facilities were on the complete opposite side of the island from the main harbor and tourist attractions, and as far as she could tell from the map, there wasn’t even a proper road near the facilities. But Homura was still making plans to visit the local sights on the off chance that she got the opportunity to go there.
“Seisa Beach… Maryudou Waterfall… Mangroves… Sea turtles… Ooh, Ishigaki beef… sushi… The piglets are so cute… but they look delicious too. What to do…? My souvenir budget alone won’t be enough…”
As Homura turned the page, a tall silhouette stopped beside her along the aisle.
“Fish or beef? —Or perhaps me instead?”
The one who asked that wasn’t a flight attendant, but an older teenage boy. He wore a high school uniform, with a loose necktie hanging around the collar of his dress shirt. He had firm and solid shoulders, as well as slightly natural permed hair.
He peered down at Misasagi-senpai with a snicker.
“—Fish.”
Senpai replied with a serious expression, which made the boy groan as if struck in the heart.
“Geez, yer retorts to mah jokes are blunt as usual. I’m at mah wit’s here, seriously[3].”

What he held in his uncouth hands were two plates carrying neither fish nor beef, but rather transparent containers of dessert. One was Peach Compote Jelly and the other was Passionfruit Panna Cotta, both of which were apparently part of the in-flight menu. They both looked juicy and delicious. But even with these desserts suspended in front of her, Misasagi showed no sign of accepting them.
Looking resigned as if he had expected this, the boy offered the plates to Homura who was sitting at the window seat.
“Hey, newbie, wanna eat this? Here’s a spoon. They’re quite tasty.”
“Ah… well… err, thank you very much.”
Homura quietly took the desserts that were forced on her with both hands. This was her first time meeting this boy, but his face seemed familiar to Homura.
But right now, she was more concerned with the desserts in her hands.
“These are… from first class…!”
In other words, fruit from the heavens. Despite her hesitance to do so in front of senpai, Homura couldn’t help being awed.
Meanwhile, the boy leaned on Misasagi-senpai’s seat with his arms around her headrest as he remained standing in the aisle. Homura was shocked, having never seen any boy approach Misasagi-senpai so carelessly even at Seiran High.
“Hey, Mayo. During the stiff gathering coming up, switch over to our club. We still have a spot open for ya.”
Even in the face of such a forceful invitation, senpai shook her head with a composed expression.
“My current, club is, better.”
“I thought ya’d say that. Well, whatever. Speaking of stiff, Taga got himself jammed in the toilet door, gave me a real laugh when I saw it. Who knows what’d happen if he got any bigger than he already is.”
He cackled with a broad smile. His smiling face jogged something in Homura’s memory.
He commented as he glanced over at Touya and Ameno in the seats across the aisle.
“What, is she still in rehab? She really is hopeless, that girl.”
“…She isn’t, hopeless… She’s already, left the club.”
“You still saying that? Stupid. Just hurry up and make her come back. For your sake.”
After letting out a huge sigh in an exasperated tone, the boy struck Misasagi with a poke to the forehead.
It hit with a snap loud enough for even Homura to hear.
“……”
Even so, Misasagi didn’t budge an inch and merely kept staring at the back of the seat in front of her. But Homura caught a glimpse of senpai’s pursed lips and angry expression at that moment.
“Wha…”

Touya, who had witnessed that scene, scowled and was about to stand up from his seat.
However, before he could do so, a low voice spoke up.
“—Tenryuu, go back to your own seat already.”
At some point without Homura noticing, Fujimori-sensei had lifted up her eye mask a bit and was glaring at the boy with a sharp gaze.
Having been chided, the boy jokily shrugged in disappointment and dutifully obeyed Fujimori’s order.
“Well, sorry for butting in. See ya later. —Fish, huh? Kuku.”
“…!”
Inwardly, Homura gasped.
After all, the boy had placed his hand on Misasagi’s head as he left, like a parting gift. She instinctively half-rose from her seat and watched his back as he walked away.
“That’s Tenryuu Kazuma…”
Touya murmured that as he sat back down in his seat, clearly anxious.
Hearing that name, Homura finally remembered him clearly.
—He was the outstanding talent who was widely known as the face of the Japanese branch of the Exploration Club.
He was the official representative of young Nutellan investigators chosen by the UNPIEP’s Japan branch, and the current Exploration Club president at Osaka Prefectural School Nagumo High.
On top of his assigned position, that boy, Tenryuu Kazuma, also had many opportunities to engage in international activities and was frequently exposed to the media unlike other investigators, who were protected from aggressive journalists.
Homura had seen his face just last month in the news.
Tenryuu had been doing an interview while surrounded by many reporters. His humorous image as he spoke calmly and crisply with an adult air, exciting the reporters several times in the course of his speech, had left quite an impression on her.
Even inside the plane, several passengers here and there seemed to have recognized his appearance and voice. Fujimori’s decision to cut the conversation short was quite justified.
However, Homura was honestly disappointed that her observation of such a famous person ended so soon. With nothing else to do, she held out the sweets in her hands to Misasagi, who was acting composed as if nothing had happened.
“Umm, senpai, what should I do with this? I ended up taking them…”
“They’re, tasty, right?”
As if to say that the desserts had committed no sin, Misasagi took all but one of the sweets from Homura’s hand and pushed them onto the chest of Touya across the aisle. Ameno’s eyes quietly lit up in anticipation next to him.
“C-Can I have these?”

“Yeah. I’m going, to rest, for a bit.”
Declaring that, Misasagi then reclined her chair after giving polite warning to the passenger behind her, and closed her eyes.
“…She really is angry…”
Misasagi-senpai’s sleeping face was slightly sullen, and Homura couldn’t helped but smile at how cute she looked like that.
After a two and a half hour flight, the plane touched down at Naha Airport.
The flight had practically gone by in the blink of an eye, but the journey ahead was going to be much longer.
Their group switched airplanes and went from the main island of Okinawa to Ishigaki Island.
From the airport on Ishigaki Island, they then headed by fast tram to Ishigaki harbor.
Then, from the harbor, they boarded a fixed-course high-speed boat which would take them to their final destination, Iriomote Island.
The high-speed boat sailed swiftly across white-crested waves.
Standing on the top open deck, Homura was deeply moved by the pale-colored sea that made her truly feel that she had come to a southern country. But, in truth, physically she was—
“Hot… It’s… hoooooot!”
Homura stepped out from the shade of the deck’s eaves directly into the sunlight shining down from above. She held out her arms wide as she closed her eyes and let out a happy shout.
Having traveled through only air-conditioned places in their journey until now, she felt as if the sunlight was pressing down on her skin.
And that made the sea breeze feel all the nicer, so much so that she felt goosebumps even in this oppressive heat.
As she adjusted her wildly flying hair, she turned to the boy crouching down beside her.
“Are you all right, Akiho-kun?”
“……”
There was no reply.
Ever since they had gotten off their first plane at Naha Airport, Saho Akiho’s face had been extremely pale and he hadn’t said more than two words. Right now, he was leaning against the ship’s railing and crouching on the deck, completely at the mercy of the ship’s shaking and obviously in need of aid.
“I’m weak… to moving vehicles.”
“……”
Seeing Saho nod weakly, Homura couldn’t help but sympathize with him.
Well, it was a relief that it hadn’t resulted in any big ruckus while they traveled like Fujimori-sensei had worried about, at least.
“Umm, how about some anti-travel sickness medicine… You already drank some? But you threw it up? Ah, I see… sounds tough.”
“……(nod).”

Regular passengers were quite few on the ship, with most of the available space onboard having been reserved by the Exploration Club. According to Ameno's explanation, this boat had been specially half-chartered for this trip to transport the Exploration Club members.
The most memorable event while they'd been boarding was seeing a mature-looking, male official at Ishigaki harbor catch sight of Misasagi-senpai and greet her familiarly, to which senpai had smiled and deeply bowed back in return.
Meanwhile, the prominent male Exploration Club member who was a greater source of concern than young Akiho to Homura and the others right now, Tenryuu Kazuma, had said he would wait for his school's club members, who would be arriving late. He told them that he'd take a later flight, before going off on his own to the Naha Airport's food court to pass the time until then.
Tenryuu had been accompanied by Nagumo High's teaching advisor. He was someone that Homura recognized from the news just like Tenryuu. However, unexpectedly, in contrast to the image of a "bright and cheerful older man" that he'd given off on the news, he had quite a stern air about him in person. Fujimori-sensei had courteously greeted him as a fellow teacher, but the two of them hadn't talked much and seemed to have a strange atmosphere between them, making Homura cock her head in puzzlement.
Homura's gossip antenna had reacted sharply as she wondered whether there was some unknown discord between them, but when they boarded the boat, it turned out be a baseless fear as nothing happened (…though, that was mostly because the teacher in question wasn't on board).
In the passengers' cabin, Exploration Club members from every school were meeting each other again for the first time in a long while and excitedly chatting. The teachers in charge of them had also temporarily forgotten their positions and were conversing together like old reunited war buddies. That was quite a relieving sight to see in its own way, but it left the younger new members bored with nothing to do—
So, Homura had left the passengers' cabin using the excuse to go check on Saho out on deck.
At that moment, a girl behind Homura peered over her shoulder at the poor boy.
"Is he okay?"
It was a girl with wavy hair in a loose bob-cut that reached down to her chin.
While turning her attention to the new girl, Homura checked Saho's near-death state once more.
"Ah, yeah, he's okay, technically. It doesn't seem like… he'll get any worse, I guess?"

“So he’s already at his worst right now? I see. Yeah, his expression right now is like that of Wasasuke when he was submerged in the bath—Here, have some water if you like.”
The female student crouched down and held out a bottle of mineral water to him, and Saho managed to limply nod and accept it.
“Earth is so inconvenient, not being able to use a musical phrase[4] to strengthen our automatic nervous system.”
The girl turned back to Homura and greeted her in a monotonous voice.
“Nice to meet you. You’re a first-year too, right? I’m Himekawa from Tomakomai Denpa in Hokkaido.”
“I’m Hinooka Homura from Seiran High. Nice to meet you, Himekawa-san. I look forward to being acquainted with you—Eh, did you say Tomakomai… Denpa?”
“That’s right. ‘Denpa’ as in radio waves. Its full official name Tomakomai Denpa Technical High School is quite a mouthful. We usually call it either ‘Tomaden’ or ‘Tomako Tech’.”
Himekawa waved her hands above her head with a strange gesture to mime emitting radio signal as she finished her self-introduction.
“Yeah, we do the same thing at our school, we often call it ‘Blue High’[5]—Ah, but I’ve never seen Misasagi-senpai call it that.”
“How nice.”
“What is? And how so?”
Homura was bewildered by Himekawa’s unexpected response.
“I mean, it’s nice how there are other club members besides yourself at Seiran High, Hinooka-san. I’m the only female member in our club. The other six club members are all boys. Even our teaching advisor is a man.”
“Eh, you’re the only girl!? I’m envious of how many members you have, but a single girl among six boys? That’s quite the difficult hurdle… I’m impressed that you can stay in the club. Do they treat you courteously?”
“No, not at all. Every day is a whirlwind of blunders, thick-headedness and sexual harassment for me. But they’re all spineless good-for-nothings at their core, so—well, I’m pretty used to it by now.”
Himekawa calmly spoke of the troubles she went through.
“That’s why I want to make some female friends here at SA at least.”
“I feel the same way,” said Homura in agreement, holding out her hand.
The two girls firmly shook heads.
“So now that we’ve deepened our female friendship—how about you come over too, Otomaru-kun?”
Himekawa called out to a short-statured boy who appeared to be a first-year like them.
The boy, who had been taking pictures of the coral reefs beneath the water below while letting out cries of awe, put away his terminal in his pocket and walked over to Homura and the others.
“You said your name was Hinooka? Then you’re Hinooka-san from Seiran High? I’m Otomaru from Kanazawa Asano High. Nice to meet you.”

“Ah, you’re from a different school than Himekawa-san. Yeah, nice to meet you too.”
When Homura finished introducing herself, Otomaru looked at her with shining eyes of excitement.
As Homura was startled by his reaction, Otomaru began to speak in a heated tone.
“You’re THAT Hinooka Homura, the one who participated on a rescue mission with senior members despite being a first year and brought back two stranded club members, right? It’s an honor to meet you!”
“T-Thanks… But I mostly just acted according to the directions Koma-senpai and the others gave me, and I don’t really feel that I managed to be a good assistant.”
“That’s not true at all. I was really impressed when I heard the story. Could you tell me about it later?”
“I’m also interested in hearing about it,” said Himekawa.
“Uwah, s-sure,” replied Homura while holding her cheeks bashfully.
When she asked Himekawa and Otomaru whether they were previous acquaintances, they replied that they’d only met in person for the first time today.
“He was in the seat next to me on the plane from Naha, and we kinda hit it off, especially after I found out he was in the opposite situation of me.”
“Hmm? Opposite situation?”
Homura tilted her head in puzzlement. Otomaru crossed his arms and nodded as he explained.
“That’s right. My school’s Exploration Club is filled with nothing but girls besides me.”
“Oh my.”
Saho’s eyes lit up in interest even in his dying state beside Homura.
“From what I heard, his case is even more serious, which actually made me feel better about my own situation, if you pardon my rudeness,” said Himekawa. “My school is a technical school, so the percentage of female students has always been low. But I still have some female friends in my class.”
“Hmm, I see. Then by the opposite situation, you mean?”
Homura looked from Himekawa to Otomaru.
“My school was originally a girl’s school, and on paper, it’s been a co-ed school for several years now. But the male student population is overwhelmingly low. So naturally, the Exploration Club is also—”
“A garden of women, right?”
That was how Homura phrased it, but Otomaru just nodded with a slightly tired smile.
“Why would they make an Exploration Club at that kind of school…?” wondered Homura as she returned a similar bitter smile.
“That’s what I want to ask, truly. But, in any case, Kanazawa Asano High was the only choice of school that fit my needs where I live.”

“I see…”
Homura turned meek as she felt the weight of determination in Otomaru’s words.
“…Is that because you wanted to join the Exploration Club?”
“Of course.”
“Was it the same reason for you, Himekawa-san?”
“Well, pretty much. I was interested in the Exploration Club. Though that wasn’t the entire reason that I applied to my school.”
“What does that…” began Homura as she tried to find out the meaning behind that last sentence, but then…
“I heard that Touya-kun also entered your school primarily for the Exploration Club, right?”
Himekawa changed the topic as she turned to look at the corpse lying at Homura’s feet.
Releasing the misunderstanding, Homura quickly corrected her.
“Eh? No, no, that’s not Touya-kun. He’s Akiho-kun. Err—”
“Ah, sorry. I thought for sure it was him since he was with you, Hinooka-san. Then, this person is—”
“Saho, a first year like us, right? He really is no good riding vehicles, huh?” finished Otomaru.
Though she’d been beaten to the punch, Homura still caught up and introduced him.
“—This is Saho Akiho, from Hiyoshizaka High.”
Meanwhile, Saho weakly beckoned at Himekawa and Homura with his hand.
In the end, they all crouched down to peer at Saho.
“As long… As long as there are girls beside me… I’m fine…”
Saho managed to wring out those words in a groan.
“Hey, don’t push yourself. You’ll die,” said Otomaru consolingly. “And speaking of Touya, he was busy talking in the passengers’ cabin.”
“Otomaru-kun, do you already know Touya-kun?”
Otomaru nodded. Himekawa also nodded and elaborated further.
“We’re all online chat friends. That’s how we heard about you, Hinooka-san.”
“Wait, Touya-kun did!?” Homura frantically shot to her feet and shrunk away.
“Is there a problem with that?” asked Himekawa. “I personally don’t like doing face-to-face video chats, so I don’t know what he looks like, though.”
“H…Heeh, is that so? I see. S-So, how much did he tell you about me?”
Himekawa and Otomaru looked up in puzzlement as Homura acted agitated and suspicious.
At that moment, the very subject of their conversation, Touya, came up the steps to the ship’s deck together with Ameno.
“Hinooka, there you are. We’re going to be arriving soon,” said Touya.
“How’s Akiho-san’s condition?” asked Ameno.

When they arrived on deck, Touya immediately noticed the two other first years with Homura.
“Yo, Touya,” greeted Otomaru with a raised hand.
“Otomaru, huh—then you must be Himekawa-san from Tomakomai Denpa, right?”
“Yes, you’re spot on. Hello, Touya-kun.”
Even while she greeted Touya, Himekawa’s gaze seemed to be fixed on Ameno.
“Ah… It’s the real Ameno-chan… Amazing… Your movements are so natural… Umm, Saho-san has recovered to the point where he can crack jokes, so it’s fine to just ignore him now.”
“That’s good to hear.”
Ameno put a hand to her chest in relief, which made Himekawa coo in awe again.
“Stop it with the neglect play…” Saho quietly groaned.
As Ameno introduced herself to Otomaru and Himekawa, Homura questioned Touya with a sour expression.
“Touya-kun, you’re already acquainted with Himekawa-san and Otomaru-kun, aren’t you?”
“Hmm? Yeah. This is my first time meeting them in person, though.”
“Since when… and how?”
“How? Through this, obviously.”
Touya reached into his pocket, and following his example, Himekawa and Otomaru did so as well, all of them taking out their portable terminals, which were distributed to all investigators.
“And we also used the Collab on the Exploration Club’s website,” added Himekawa.
“Collab?”
“It’s short for Collaboration Tool. It’s like a sophisticated online bulletin board. You only have your name registered so far, Hinooka-san, so your personal profile is completely blank…”
“There’s something like that?”
Touya looked at her in disbelief.
“…I believe I told you about it once before, though.”
“Sorry. I forgot. I completely forgot about everything I was taught before final exams.”
“I see… Then it can’t be helped.”
Touya grudgingly conceded the plausibility of that, and for some reason, Homura proudly had her hands on her hips.
“—I can see it!”
While leaning her body forward over the deck railing, Ameno turned back to the rest of them with an excited shout.
The sea was so clear that you could see the coral reefs below, and in the distance ahead of the ship, a thick forest was slowly getting closer. It was Iriomote Island’s natural sightseeing landmark, the mangrove forest.

Otomaru drew near the railing and shouted in excitement at the prospect of landing there.
“That’s right! We should take a picture. A commemorative photo.” As she spoke, Otomaru switched his terminal to camera mode. “This may not be Nutella, but as people who’ve never been to Okinawa before, it’s untrodden land for us, right? We should add it to our exploration records.”
“Yeah, that’s a great idea. Let’s do it,” said Homura as she fixed up her messy hair from the sea breeze.
“Then please line up together, everyone. I’ll take the picture,” said Ameno
“Eh… Ameno-chan, won’t you join us in the photo?” asked Himekawa disappointedly
“We can take turns taking pictures, can’t we? Though we might not have time, since we’re almost at the harbor,” pointed out Otomaru.
“Wait five seconds.”
Saying that, Touya took a strip of something and used it to quickly fasten Otomaru’s terminal to a deck pillar, and then he hurried back to the railing.
“Ameno, please activate the camera shutter by wireless remote control at the proper time.”
Now able to join Homura and the others in the picture thanks to Touya’s cleverness, Ameno nodded.
“Roger! …You know, it seems like you’re brazenly taking advantage of me as a robot more and more, Takumi-san… Anyway, everybody ready? Cheeze~☆”
Click.
—With Iriomote Island growing bigger and taking up the view starboard side of the ship…
“……Blergh.”
It ended up being a modest photo of them all gathered around Saho, who was still limply collapsed on the deck floor and hanging onto the railing.
Soon after, the ship arrived at Nakama Port, one of Iriomote Island’s chief entrance harbors.
There, a certain group of several first year Exploration Club members excitedly got off at the pier, following the regular passengers…
Then, the ship’s engine roared back to life as it suddenly left port, leaving them behind on the pier. And with the other Exploration Club members onboard, including their teachers and upperclassmen.
The disembarked group frantically shouted “Why!?” and desperately tried screaming at the ship to make it do a U-turn back to the pier. However, there was no sign of anyone on deck or at the ship windows to hear them…
Truly a despairing situation.
…Of course, it was just a customary prank done by the upperclassmen and the ship’s captain, who was friends with them.
After going back to pick up the careless first-years (incidentally, Otomaru-kun had jumped into the sea to chase after the ship) and leaving the harbor,

the ship left its usual route and headed around Iriomote Island to reach the western side on the opposite end.
After their long trip through land, sky and sea, they finally arrived at a small bay with a rough rocky beach, definitely not a place aimed at tourists. This was the training field run by the state and shared with the Self-Defence force. The pier that extended out from the embankment was its harbor.
An UNPIEP flag hung from the pier in welcome to the young investigators.
Chapter 3 END

the one in first class is wider, y'know?
gah!
creek

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) Okinawa: a Japanese prefecture that consists of a series of islands to the far south of the main Japanese islands. A popular tourist and vacation spot, especially during summer.

(2) SA: short for “Summer Assembly”.

(3) The male character here speaks with a distinct Osakan accent, roughly similar to what a Southern accent sounds like in English.

(4) Phrase: a music term that refers to a unit of musical meter that has a complete musical sense of its own. To put it in simple terms, it is a short melody that can either exist on its own or be part of a larger piece.

(5) “Seiran” means indigo blue, hence the nickname “Blue High”.

Chapter 4

The next day, the Summer Assembly on Iriomote Island finally began.
It began with the most important subject matter right from the start, with the first program on the itinerary being the presentation of the latest investigation results from each school and the introduction of new club members.
The auditorium where the presentations were being held was a typical fan-shaped hall with a podium facing rows of audience seats on a sloped floor. Over one hundred Exploration Club members and officials from every school in the country were gathered on the oblong bench seats, clamoring and jostling amongst each other animatedly.
If it weren't for the sight of the sea and trees basking in the sun on the other side of the windows, one wouldn't believe that this was a facility located within the jungle of a nature conservation site.
"……"
It was almost time for the presentations to begin.
Homura was wearing her school uniform and sitting on a hard and stiff seat while filled with a kind of nervousness she'd never experienced before. She frequently readjusted the cord of the ID card hanging from her neck.
Yesterday at the lodging facilities, a commotion had stirred up every time people went to greet each arriving group of Exploration Club members from all over the country, so things had remained bustling and lively until quite late at night… Though of course, it hadn't been so bad that Homura hadn't gotten any sleep at all last night.
However, Homura had found it a shame that she hadn't managed to find the time to leisurely talk all through the night with the familiar faces she had run into within the lodging facilities, since they had all seemed busy with preparatory meetings for their schools.
Today for sure this time, thought Homura, excited for reasons completely different from the main purpose of the SA.
Also, for the last little while, Homura had found her attention grabbed by the girl sitting next to her, who had her face planted on the desk in front of her. Her long black hair was spread out in waves on the desk and covered her face, making her eerily resemble a sea monster.
"……"
Homura was sitting in a row slightly towards the back of the audience. All the Seiran High members were grouped together towards the end of the row with Fujimori-sensei and Misasagi-senpai sitting at the corner seats. Homura was seated at the other end of their group, and arranged next to her was the familiar group from Hiyoshizaka High.
The girl right next to her was also a Hiyoshizaka High club member.

Her ID card was hidden by her body, but the name plate in front of her seat read “Hiyoshizaka High First Year, Kanae Yuri”.
She looked to have completely fallen sleep, based on her faint breathing. She’d even folded her glasses and placed them next to her name plate beforehand.
Right, her name is Kanae-san… I haven’t properly talked to her once yet…
After the previous rescue mission, Homura had been introduced to all the Hiyoshizaka club members by the club president Kamikoma when they visited the school.
At that time, Kanae had simply stated her name and cut off any further conversation.
Homura had felt like she was being mostly ignored by her, and that impression still persisted even now. Though it was also partially Homura’s own fault for not proactively trying to talk with her…
Homura recalled seeing Kanae uninterestedly respond to Ameno’s unhesitant attempts to talk to her, while Homura herself and Touya had been dealing with the more rowdy club members like Saho.
Kanae was a new club member and female first year student just like Homura. And she even attended Hiyoshizaka High, the nearest school to Seiran High.
Therefore, Homura had reasonable justification to forge interpersonal relations with her in order to smoothly conduct club activities hereafter, but —
More than that or anything else, Homura’s primary motivation was her curiosity over just what kind of girl Kanae was, sparked by the mysterious atmosphere she gave off.
This Summer Assembly would surely serve as a chance to get closer to her. Even if it only lead to embarrassment and fruitless effort. If she could become close to her like how she did with Kujou Orie, and if she could view her small step forward from the person she was yesterday as a good thing…
As she thought of such things and stared at the girl next to her while imagining her hidden sleeping face, her eyes happened to meet those of a male student two seats away from her.
It was another student from Hiyoshizaka, a second-year senpai named Hayase.
Beside him, Saho, who had recovered from his earlier motion sickness, was off in his own world, having been fiddling enthusiastically with his terminal since this morning.
“Shh.”
Hayase winked at Homura and made a quiet shushing sound with a finger placed on his lips.
Taking that signal to mean “let Kanae sleep”, Homura nodded back silently, but she soon learned that her conclusions had been too hasty.
…Eh? Wait, what?

Hayase picked up the recyclable drinking cup in front of him, and just when Homura thought he was going to drink the coffee within it, he heartily held it aloft and then threw it straight in her direction.
—Bang!
A crushing hit! The cup bounced off Kanae Yuri's head, the sound of impact ringing throughout the hall. The low murmurs throughout the hall instantly turned silent at that instant.
"……Oww…"
Sluggishly lifting up her head, Kanae turned to glare through her bangs at the shocked and frozen Homura, as if she were looking at her parents' killer.
"Eh? No, you got it wrong…!"
Homura frantically shook her head.
Deep shadows appeared beneath Kanae's glaring eyes, her anger clearly increasing exponentially.
When Homura turned to look at the culprit Hayase, he was casually facing forward with his chin on his hand as if nothing had happened.
Guh, so cruel… He's passing the blame to me…!
Homura wasn't given the time to defend herself.
Cruelly enough, the meeting began at that moment, as the huge screen at the front of the room lit up with the UNPIEP Japanese Branch logo and several students walked up on the stage.
Kanae cut off her glare from Homura and turned towards the stage like everyone else. With nothing else she could do, Homura also turned her attention towards the stage.
All the club members throughout the hall began whispering to each other at the sight of the slender youth at the forefront of the group on stage.
"It's Oozore…"
"Oozore-senpai."
"So that's the Wizard…"
He was wearing the same school uniform as Tenryuu Kazuma from the plane.
Among the Seiran High seats, Touya leaned forward, his focus completely locked on the young man on stage.
"—Good morning to you all."
The male student's greeting resounded from his tiepin mike through the speakers throughout the hall.
Everyone present in the hall responded and greeted him back, their synchronized voices resounding so deafeningly through the hall that it startled Homura. It was completely different from the usual sleepy greetings during morning assembly at school.
Due to her surprise, Homura was several seconds behind everyone else in calling out "Good morning". She wanted to hide her face in embarrassment at that moment.

“Now then, as scheduled, I’d like to open the **th Summer Assembly for the year 20**.”
There was a short yet strong applause for the opening of the assembly.
Yet Oozore’s low and deep voice managed to make itself heard even above the applause. He gave off a stiff image, but his tone was composed and completely devoid of tension.
Homura’s first impression of him was of a “general”.
Homura recalled seeing him stand beside Tenryuu Kazuma during a news program and acting like a silent shadow to the brighter boy as Kazuma answered questions from the interviewer.
“—I am Oozore Misaki, a third year and the Exploration Club vice-president at Osaka Prefectural School Nagumo High. I’ll be serving as the moderator for this year’s SA.”
Oozore turned his gaze towards the female student standing beside him.
“I’ll be serving as the moderating assistant. I’m N-Nagashino Fuyu, a first year at Nagumo High. I look forward to working with you all.”
Her voice was a bit shrill and nervous, the complete opposite of Oozore’s.
Even when offered applause, she maintained her serious expression from beginning to end, lacking enough composure to smile.
The small-statured Nagashino was tightly gripping a computer tablet in her hands, clearly nervous to everyone who saw her.
But that was only natural in her position. Following her self-introduction, Nagashino turned to bow in greeting in the direction of the VIP seats within the hall, and then began stiffly introducing the various important guests present today, including administrative bureau directors from all sections of government, foreign officials sent from UN headquarters, and the chief of this exhibition facility.
D-Do your best…
Not paying any attention to the names of the various VIPS being introduced, Homura simply felt herself worrying frantically for Nagashino in sympathy as a fellow first year girl.
Once the introductions ended, the main mic was handed back to Oozore.
“We will now give summaries of the investigation results from Nutella this year. To remind everyone, everything announced here is material that has been recorded in pictures and stored in the library here. We will also conduct simultaneous translation for the VIPs here. Therefore, the presenters should try to explain and articulate their results as clearly as possible.”
“It’s fine if they just say the minimum necessary, you know?”
The source of that comment spoken outside the microphone was Tenryuu.
He was sitting on a chair placed in front of the foremost audience seats near the stage with his legs crossed.
“We’re going to hand out documents with the same content written on them anyway, right? Besides, the higher-ups only pay attention to the numbers

and graphs. In that case, I'd rather they wrack their brains and come up with something interesting so that we don't end up dozing off down here."
"…We welcome questions and comments during the allotted time, but please raise your hands first before speaking. Whispering and interruptions from the audience is frowned upon, understood?"
The last of Oozore's words were a rebuke aimed at Tenryuu.
Homura couldn't help giggling along with the rest of the audience.
It was easy to guess why the vice-president Oozore was put in charge of the assembly instead of the Exploration Club representative who was supposed to be the role model for all investigators.
However, when Homura glanced at Kanae, the girl didn't bother to smile at the funny exchange and was simply leaning languidly against her chair and gazing at the screen up front with a downcast look.
On stage, Nagashino took over from Oozore, obviously still tense but seemingly more relaxed than before. She manipulated the tablet in her hand, causing a bird's-eye-view map of Japan to appear on the screen above. The map was dotted with the names of the schools of each participating Exploration Club throughout the country.
"There are no schools absent due to being occupied on Nutella for this year's SA. All thirteen school clubs from across Japan are present and accounted for. The number of currently active Japanese Nutellan investigators by school year is: thirty-five third years, thirty-two second years, and twenty-nine first years, for a total of ninety-six members. Before we begin each school's presentation, I would first like to introduce the new investigators who are our new comrades."
Just as recorded in the program schedule, the introduction of new club members began.
They were called in turns, in order of school location from north to south.
Homura's heartbeat sped up as the names were called.
Naturally, the first to be called were the two new members from the Hokkaido school Tomakomai Denpa High, one of which was Himekawa, who Homura had met on the boat deck.
The ceremony consisted of a simple ten-second self-introduction for each new member… or so it should have been, but…
"I'm Himekawa Shizune. I look forward to working with you all. My nickname is the Northernmost Woman of Nutella. I'd like to capture lots of the female club members here at Iriomote and bring them back home with me."
—Himekawa added that extra line at the end of her introduction. It was unclear whether it was in order to get some laughs like Tenryuu suggested or because it really was her sincere wish, but it did end up raising the bar for the new members who came after her.
That was completely unnecessary~, Homura inwardly complained with a slump of her shoulders. However, while Himekawa spoke in her usual dispassionate tone, Homura was a bit concerned by the faint yet visible

blush on her cheeks. Incidentally, the whole “Northernmost Woman” thing was just a joke, since there were other female investigators at higher latitude schools in Europe and North America.
After two more schools finished the introductions of their new members, it was Hiyoshizaka High’s turn next.
For some reason, unusual bouts of jeering came from the crowd during each new member’s introduction. However…
“Kanae Yuri. Nice to meet you.”
The girl next to Homura said only that and then sat back down.
“…Eh, Yuri-chan, that’s it? Really? You’re trying to make yourself a cool character?”
Kanae looked just like a scowling Japanese doll, the way she sat unmoving in her seat. Saho tried to persistently question her. However, he was smacked on the head by Hayase-senpai.
“Hey, it’s your turn next, so hurry up and do it.”
Naturally, Saho stood up happily.
“I’m Saho, Saho Akiho! I’m part of the Nutella Native Animal Conservation subcommittee, so please feel free to come see me! But boys don’t need to come! Also—”
As Saho’s introduction looked like it was going to continue for a while, Hayase intervened once again to shut him up.
—And then finally, it was Seiran High’s turn.
I-It’s time!
She stiffly exchanged looks with Touya. In the end, Touya was the first to stand up.
“I’m Touya Takumi, the first member this year to require a rescue mission on Nutella. I apologize for the inconvenience I caused back then!”
Touya bowed his head in the direction of Kamikoma and Taga-senpai.
“You got that right! Treating us to a worldwide sweets buffet is only the start of what you owe us!” replied Kamikoma, while the audience laughed amicably.
Touya also smiled wryly at that.
“But one good thing came out of that disaster. I came to think that it’s nice to return to Earth every once in a while too.”
With that, Touya bowed again and sat back down, as raucous laughter and applause came up in response.
Only Fujimori-sensei, who had been stuck dealing with the aftermath of that incident, had her arms folded with a sullen expression.
…It’s finally my turn.
It felt like the hall had grown oddly quiet at that moment. Fujimori later told her that she was simply being excessively self-conscious, but that impression still stuck.
“I’m Hinooka Homura. I-I look forward to working with you all—”

Homura was overwhelmed by the pressure and could only speak the words that immediately came to her mind. Naturally, she lack any composure to make jokes.
“—I’ve only been to Nutella a few times so far. T-The truth is, it still doesn’t feel real, the fact that I’m actually exploring a new planet. I always feel like I’m playing a game, knowing that there should have been a better route to take but having forgotten to save beforehand. If possible, I’d like to redo things from the start. Err, sorry for babbling like this… That’s all I have to say…”
With that weak ending, Homura returned to her seat.
The hall was filled with a delicate atmosphere that made her want each second to pass by faster. But then…
“Me too.”
“It’s the same for me.”
Such short and quiet comments resounded through the hall. They were the murmurs of Exploration Club members from unknown schools whose faces she was seeing for the first time.
“I always make sure to properly save, you know? But I can’t go back to my save point.”
That joke spoken by someone provoked mild laughter.
That laughter was something that Homura hadn’t intentionally aimed for at all.
……Phew…
In the midst of that laughter, she felt as if she was being hit by a sharp gaze.
Was it one of the UN officials in the VIP seats? Or from one of the club presidents? She couldn’t say who for sure, but she felt as if she were being evaluated by someone, which made her shiver slightly.
But that feeling faded away soon after, and the audience’s attention turned away from her as the next new club member was introduced. Well, that was only to be expected.
“Hi, I’m Fujimori Ameno!” The petite girl jumped up from her seat. “I’m the newest and youngest club member in the country. The truth is… I’m actually a robot.”
As Ameno puffed up her chest proudly, various affected reactions came from the audience, such as “No way that’s true”, “Wow, she watches way too much anime”, “We can’t tell for sure unless she strips down”, and “That aside, she is cute”.
Ameno listened to them all with a deeply moved expression.
“Right!? I also feel that I’m quite human-like… Huh…?”
Ameno tried to clap her hands happily, but one of her wrists suddenly detached and her hand fell to the desk with a clang.
From her severed wrist, there were clearly mechanical tubes and cables peeking out, and even small gears fell out and rolled over the desk. Ameno’s face turned pale at the sight—

Shocked, Homura reflexively leaned away from her. But, after Ameno had fully basked in the tense atmosphere filling the hall, she poked out her real hand from inside her parka's sleeve.
"It was a sleight of hand. Literally. Ehehe."
"A-All right, I believe that's all from Seiran High! Umm, everyone, please try to keep the jokes to a reasonable level. Next is Hamamatsu Central Engineering—wait, why are you wearing masks!?"
On stage, Nagashino, who had constantly been checking her watch, wore a faint expression as she was left at a complete loss.
And with that harmonious atmosphere filling the hall, the new club member introductions eventually came to an end.
The introduced new members were not just limited to first years, but also included a few second year students who had recently joined.
But what really surprised Homura was the existence of Exploration Club members who had no affiliated school. Amongst the audience seats that were organized according to school, the section where these students were gathered stood out.
Following moderator Oozore's urging, the nine students there all stood up together. They were high school students like everyone else, but they wore various school uniforms and their school years were also diverse.
They were called reserve members.
After finishing each of their introductions, Oozore offered a supplemental explanation.
"I will explain the reserve member system as simply as possible. Unfortunately, reserve members do not yet have a base to serve their own Exploration Club. Each is enrolled at various different public or private high school institutions.
"There are three main reasons for this: there is no school with an Exploration Club in their commuting vicinity; they are unable to find other members with sufficient IE Responses to make a club; or the environment on Nutella that corresponds to their school's location on Earth is unsuitable for making a base.
"However, due to the reserve member system, applicants can participate in expeditions by going to other nearby schools. Three reserve members from the Sapporo district participate at Tomakomai Denpa High, two reserve members from the Sendai district participate at Hiyoshizaka High, and four reserve members from the Kyoto district and the Nara-Wakayama district participate at Nagumo High. The reserve members provisionally join the Exploration Clubs at these schools and participate in exploration activities and practical training in joint cooperation with the local club members.
"For all of you who have participated in exploration activities on Nutella, this goes without saying, but this is a very crucial part of the preparations for them to make their own Exploration Clubs in the future. They may be called reserve members, but they are genuine young investigators just like

the rest of us. I'd like for everyone to take the opportunity to freely form and deepen relationships amongst each other during this year's SA."
After those last words by Oozore, loud applause rang out for the nine reserve members.
"……Huh…"
Homura, who of course had failed to follow Oozore's explanations, constantly asked questions to Touya next to her, and inwardly summarized it to herself.
In other words, they were members who had yet to establish a base camp somewhere and were still left wandering aimlessly. Basically, they were freely doing part-time work until they managed to gather comrades.
"—Something like that, right? Right?"
"Ah? …I guess?"
Though, Touya's expression was dubious as he responded.
However, to Homura, they were definitely dazzling beings overflowing with passion for adventure, just like Misasagi-senpai who had continued to be an investigator even when the Seiran High club's activities were suspended by going over to Hiyoshizaka High (according to what Homura heard from Touya).
"Well, since we have the chance to meet them in person, let's go ask them what it's actually like for them."
"Yeah, why not?"
At last, they moved on to today's main program, the presentation of every school's exploration results.
Homura pondered as she looked over the map of every school in Japan on the screen.
"I see… Paired schools, huh…"
It was a term that had been brought up during the introduction of new members.
Homura had already experienced it for herself, but the meeting made her conscious of the concept of paired schools once more. It was a natural, everyday part of the lives of club members, requiring no special explanation.
Paired schools basically referred to schools that operated in the same area on Nutella and were close to each other in Japan on Earth as well.
Seiran High and Hiyoshizaka High were an example of this. Other examples included: the Ecchuu Takaoka Industrial Arts School in Toyama Prefecture and Kanazawa Asano High in Ishikawa Prefecture; Hamamatsu Central Technical School in Shizuoka Prefecture and Mikawakotobuki High in Aichi Prefecture; Osaka Prefectural School Nagumo High and Nadahama High in Hyougo Prefecture; Miyajima High in Hiroshima Prefecture and Tazatani High in Ehime Prefecture; and Nagato Fisheries School in Tamaguchi Prefecture and Hakozaki High in Fukuoka Prefecture. Each of these paired schools had a cooperative system with each other.

However, based on what Homura saw on the map, the distance between paired schools was quite random and scattered.
Furthermore, Tomakomai Denpa High was the only one without a pair. Perhaps because of that, the presentations started with Tomakomai Denpa High.
A single male student stood at the podium on stage.
“I’m Inou, the president of the Tomakomai Denpa club. Eh~, I’ll declare this for the sake of our school’s honor, but there’s no sexual harassment or gender discrimination in our club. We’re just not used to dealing with female club members.”
That self-deprecating remark bought some wry laughter from the audience. The lone girl of the club in question, Himekawa, was sitting next to the screen as his assistant, and she operated her laptop without showing any trace of a smile.
“—We weren’t able to complete our most recent periodical advance report in time, so this will serve as the announcement of our latest results. Our club has pioneered ahead of the rest of the world and managed to explain the perturbation cycle of the Bagel, the ring surrounding Nutella.”
Part of the audience released exclamations of surprise and awe. However, most of the students present didn’t seem to really understand what it meant at first. Naturally, Homura and even Touya were among those who tilted their heads in puzzlement.
Seeming to have half-expected this reaction, Inou continued on.
“I’ll briefly explain the area our club explores for the new members from other schools—”
The screen began to display a slideshow of black-and-white photos.
The current image showed a gabled-roofed log house standing in the middle of a snow-covered landscape that looked the same with or without color.
“Our school’s base camp is located in the far north on Nutella. Snowfall is almost constant in the climate there, and we’re only able to use our base camp for twenty days in Nutella’s spring out of a sixty-day year cycle. The terrain is also precipitous, and it’s difficult to go on expeditions away from our base camp and increase our mapping of the surrounding area while advancing our investigation.”
Suddenly, the image changed to that of a summer meadow.
The Bagel shone in the clear sky above there, but it looked quite different compared from how it appeared from the area belonging to Homura and her club. It was wider and dominated more of the sky. By imagining a model of Nutella and the planetary ring in her head, Homura managed to grasp the scale.
The slideshow continued on to show various photos. Club members desperately swinging axes at trees to secure a large supply of firewood. Past senior club members taking a commemorative photo of themselves in front of a huge elephant-sized deer caught in a trap. Occasionally, there were also photos taken in winter mixed in. Club members performing lively

snowboarding tricks in their spare time. And lastly, a picture of a snow field with a huge, eerie crevice bored into it.
“In the past, we also conducted long-distance expeditions in the direction of Sapporo and Hakodate, but we gave up each time. As such, our school mainly conducts astronomical observation for the majority of our investigation activities. It’s not like we decided to shut ourselves in because we like it… Wait, haven’t the slideshow photos turned weird?”
The club president reflexively retorted as he noticed the change among the photos on the screen.
Club members sleeping huddled together on the floor within the base camp all day long. All the members dressed slovenly in their underwear, apparently due to the heat inside. Inou himself was also among them in those photos. And at the edge of the photo, Himekawa’s dejected face could be seen peeking into the camera lens.
Wearing an innocent expression, Himekawa had apparently mixed in these secretly taken photos into the slideshow.
“…Yeah, err, anyway, working in this high-latitude environment has brought on various trials, but the biggest issue is the increased gravity. It depends on individual mass as well, but essentially, think of it like having sixty hundred gram weights on your legs twenty-four hours a day as you go about your business. I believe that this will probably continue to be the northernmost Japanese base for the foreseeable future, but…”
At that point, Inou stopped speaking for some reason.
The screen switched from displaying photos to a video containing CG images.
It was a video simulation of Nutella and the Bagel.
“Now then, to move onto the main topic—our observation basically involves earnestly photographing the Bagel and Nutella’s moons from the large telescope installed at our base camp. We bring these photo negatives, or rather dry plates, back to Earth with us and analyze them by computer. Overlooking the orbits of the moons… of the satellite group from a high-latitude location also helps increases the precision and clarity of the photos, so being located in a remote northern region has both its advantages and disadvantages.
“—Please look at these images. Until now, the Bagel’s overall mass was predicted to be quite heavy and believed to be in an extremely unstable state according to Nutellan astronomical calculations. However, in reality, its orbit is quite stable. This is a simulation of what it would be like in the unstable case.”
As the video simulation proceeded to fast-forward through time, the Bagel’s striped patterns changed like breaking waves. Eventually, the planetary rings transformed into dots of light that scattered away starting from the outer rings inward.

In particular, the centermost ring turned into a tempestuous meteor rain that rained on Nutella. There were also some meteors that didn't burn up and impacted on the surface. It was a chilling image.
"—However, the behavior of Nutella's rings is actually quite different. Very few meteors fall from the Bagel. Now then, did you know that the planet Saturn in our own Solar System also has natural satellites and that the presence of these moons plays a role in stabilizing the planet's rings? Saturn's satellites are called 'Shepherd Moons'."
There, Inou briefly paused.
"Nutella's satellites also seem to play the same role when it comes to the Bagel, according to our observations. However, even when taking that into consideration, the results of our observations and simulations don't match—it's as if *the satellites are intentionally changing their orbits*."
Upon hearing that hypothesis, many members of the audience couldn't help falling into murmurs of shock.
"That's right. The satellites move spontaneously." Inou nodded at the audience. "The reflected light from the Bagel supplies magical energy and causes changes to the bodies of us investigators, as you all know. That drew our attention to the Bagel's reflectance—by working under the assumption that 'it's possible to intentionally change the orbits of the satellites in order to maintain the Bagel's overall mass', we created a new perturbation model. With this model, we were able to predict the behavior of both the Bagel and the satellites to a high degree of accuracy. In other words, we learned that the Bagel's reflectance and the orbits of the satellites have a fixed, interconnected relationship."
More exclamations of surprise came from the audience, but, perhaps because Inou kept using unfamiliar terms, the reaction was more modest compared to before. Even so, everyone in the hall earnestly kept their attention on his speech, something that Homura keenly felt even as someone far removed from astronomical terminology.
"This is as far as our observations have taken us—the following is just conjecture, but I beg your permission to speak it nonetheless. I believe that this is a kind of homeostatic system that strains to maintain the Bagel's form as a result of the very magical energy emitted by the Bagel affecting and controlling the orbits of the satellites. It's extremely unusual as an astronomical phenomenon, but if we consider magical energy as another natural part of Nutella, it isn't theoretically impossible. That's all for our club's report."
A large applause naturally arose from the audience, and many praises were rained upon Tomakomai Denpa High.
The club president bowed his head, and the other club members also stood up together and followed his example.
Homura committed to her memory their proud expressions at that moment.

Himekawa was the only one whose smile seemed a bit like she was treating it like someone else's achievement, but she still seemed happy from the bottom of her heart.
Even Tenryuu had risen from his seat to clap. His expression was serious and sincere unlike before.
"—We express our sincerest gratitude to our club advisor Goryou-sensei, to Naikon Optical Industries who cooperated with us, and to Professor Morita from the National Astronomical Observatory. We next plan to increase our observation precision while analyzing the roles of the individual satellites, and also to explain the properties of this large-scale *astronomical magical energy*."
Inou glanced at Nagashino, indicating it was time to move onto questions from the audience.
Without waiting for Nagashino's announcement, a hand quickly rose from a Caucasian male in the VIP seats. He was a commissioner directly dispatched from UN headquarters, and also held the position of Exploration Club advisor at a US high school.
After Nagashino gave him permission to speak, the man's question was translated by an interpreter and repeated in Japanese.
"Congratulations. This truly is a magnificent discovery. Truly, all of you have stepped out into the stars and mapped out space. Concerning this discovery, how do you think it will impact the Geocentric model hypothesis on Nutellan space?"
Homura's attention was caught by the words "Geocentric model".
She'd heard the term before in history class. If we remembered right… it had come up while discussing the Heliocentric model of the universe proposed by Galileo Galilei.
"……"
Inou looked to his club advisor in search of confirmation.
The slightly uneasy expression he wore at that moment was very much that of a typical high school student, which actually made Homura feel relived in a way.
Inou's expression had turned clouded the moment the words "Aristarchusic[1] system" came up within the man's question in his native language. His club advisor Goryou smiled and entrusted Inou with answering the question.
"Thank you for your praise. Concerning the Geocentric model hypothesis, we at Tomakomai Denpa High's Exploration Club neither endorse nor repudiate it, or rather, we can't. Even with these recent results, we still lack sufficient material to make conjecture, so making any judgement is put on hold for now."
After hearing just that, the commissioner gave his thanks and ended his question.
After this first school presentation ended, Homura let out a breath as the tension she'd felt until now finally faded.
"…I'm glad I came."

Next to her, Touya murmured that as his eyes glimmered with interest.
“…Yeah.” Homura nodded in agreement. “So, we can go to see the ocean now, right? We can change out of our uniforms now, right?”
“Be patient. And don’t undress. You’re not Saho, remember?”
“Eh, you called me? You’re going swimming? You’ve also got sunscreen, right?”
“Sit down. The ocean won’t be going anywhere.”
As Saho stood up from his seat, Hayase pushed him back down from next to him.
Naturally, the presentations continued after that.
There would be no end if all of them were introduced, so only the few school presentations that particularly left an impression on Homura will be listed here.
The announcement that moved Homura the most was “Nadahama High’s Announcement of a New Magic System to Replace the Current Polyhedron Loop”… or not. Perhaps it was “Hiyoshizaka High’s Report on the Longest Distance Expedition Ever to be Attempted”…
Not that either. In fact, it was a rather plain presentation by Ecchuu Takaoka High.
The Ecchuu Takaoka club president was a female glasses-wearing student.
“I’m Ecchu Takaoka’s club president, Chigozuka. Our club also travels through unexplored regions on foot, but our club mainly researches how investigators can contribute to society under the theme of the relationship between Nutella and ordinary citizens. We research the level of Nutella investigators’ societal recognition and devise realistic demonstrations to appeal to the public.”
Her glasses glinted between her symmetrical forelocks under the stage lights.
“—To summarize our research results, the appeal of pictures and videos is especially high. There is a visible tendency for a single photo of a landscape to remain more strongly imprinted in people’s memories than scientific discoveries. For example, in Earth’s astronomy field, contributions like the beautiful astronomical photos taken by the Hubble Telescope are the most famous. Tomakomai Denpa High has also released wonderful photos of Nutella’s rings, but ours are a bit different. Please look at this. We use it for landscape photography.”
Chigozuka took out her personal analog camera.
It was the same as the one Homura usually used. It was a big, heavy and cumbersome lump of cut duralumin and glass.
Next, other Ecchuu Takaoka High club members brought out a tripod. Set on top of the tripod’s platform wasn’t the standard purveyor camera used by the Exploration Club, but an ordinary digital camera.
“All right, I’m taking a picture, okay? What’s the first prime number?”
Voices from the audience shouted out either “Two[2]” or “Three”.

Chigozuka pointed the camera at the audience and clicked the shutter button, and the image data was instantly transmitted and displayed on the screen as a still image. Naturally, it showed the audience looking at the camera. However, it was in black and white. It was a rather trifling picture of the assembly hall.
“I used the digital camera just now for this photo, but please think of it as the same type of analog camera that we use to take records on expeditions and develop film—so, in the early days, the photos taken on Nutella were essentially all black and white, but these days, color photos of Nutella have also been appearing quite often in the news, right? Those are generally made by using old black-and-white picture remake technology and artificially coloring the original photos afterwards. They’re basically fake colors. Take a look.”
The black-and-white picture on the screen was re-projected with color this time.
It was a very realistic-looking photo, so much so that one wouldn’t think that it was originally black-and-white. However, the limits of the coloring technology were still visible; the fine detail colors were decisively different and the skin colors of each individual was deformed, causing the unnaturalness of it to stand out all the more if you knew what the original colors looked like.
Several club members on stage pointed out the flaws within the photo.
“Well, there are those who think that this is good enough, but… In actuality, we can take color photos on Nutella itself too. However, it isn’t cheap or easy.”
Color film compatible with Nutella still had yet to be developed.
On the screen, an unfamiliar odd-formed camera set on firmly on a tripod appeared. An investigator from a foreign country could be seen setting it up.
He should have been a high school student like Homura and the others, but he looked quite adult-like from her perspective.
“This is a Nutella-use color camera developed by a German Exploration Club. Umm, the theory behind it is very simple. There’s a special prism put inside it, which splits the light that enters through the lens and photographs it on three pieces of film at the same time. The split light passes through three separate filters of each primary color and is recorded individually in red, green and blue. Then, they bring those negatives back to Earth and recombine them by computer. It’s called the Triple Pane Method.”
The slideshow switched to photos of Nutella taken by the German Exploration Club.
They were truly beautiful and life-like photos.
There were even familiar pictures that had been used on the front covers of famous magazines.
“However, this special camera is still a prototype, and it also weighs 39 kilos. Additionally, it requires three times the normal amount of film. It’s too

heavy to hold with your bare hands and doing so also seems to darken the photos, so a tripod is necessary too. Therefore, it's inconvenient to carry around and lacks mobility. This makes it unsuitable for taking opportune pictures at a moment's notice."
The German team's failed photos were shown next.
Animals that wouldn't stop moving and branches swaying in the wind were devastating for this camera.
"They're also apparently working using a revolving prism inside the camera and miniaturizing it through trial and error, but it doesn't seem to be going well. Therefore, our club searched for an alternative."
Chigozuka took out a thin disk-shaped plate from her camera case. There was a wide hold on one side of the disk, which contained a colored lens filter.
"We call this a 'turret filter'. You screw it onto the front of the camera."
Chigozuka attached it to her camera and held it up as if to take an actual photo. The filter jutting out from the side of the camera got in the way of her hands a bit, but the weight wasn't all that different.
"This contains a spring mechanism made to automatically rotate the disk when taking a picture. You all understand now, right? Let's try taking a photo. It's usually safe to use a release."
Chigozuka attached the filter to the digital camera on the tripod. She spun the filter in reverse, making the coils inside roll up noisily. Next, she connected a mechanical release cable to the shutter button, ending her preparations. The cable also connected to the rotational shaft of the turret filter through the camera bridge.
"All right, I'm taking the photo. This is an elbow. Then what's this?"
A few people shouted "Knee[3]!" in response. Saho, who knew no fear, shouted "Stripes!". It was true that, in the instant that Chigozuka lifted her leg up, a glimpse could be caught beneath her skirt.
Slightly red-faced now, Chigozuka pressed the shutter through the connected release cable, and the filter spun as the camera shutter clicked three times. Taking three photos only took one second in all.
Impressed "Oohs" and "Aahs" at that swift function came from the mechanical-loving club members in the audience.
"Just by pressing the button once, the camera takes three successive photos with the shutter through burst photography."
The photos taken through the three-colored filter was displayed on the screen. The three photos were slid together and overlapped with each other, turning into a single color photo. It was a three-color composite photo.
If you looked at it without knowing any better, it just seemed like an ordinary photo, but when the process behind it was explained, it strangely felt like something rare and precious.

The composite photo was a bit blurred around areas like people's fingers and the contours of their faces, but it didn't stand out that much, and the background was almost perfectly reproduced.
"This isn't anything particularly new or novel. The one who devised this method was a Russian photographer named Gorski during the dawn of color photography—Hey, what are you doing there, Tenryuu-kun?"
Chigozuka, who had been facing the screen and manipulating her tablet to zoom in on the details of the photo, turned back to face the audience with a flabbergasted expression.
In the photo, Tenryuu was sitting there in the front-most row, but he had changed into a strange-colored Asura statue with six arms and three faces.
"Wahahaha, you should be grateful, you know? Hey, Chigozuka, you used a digital camera for that photo, right? But on Nutella, we'd actually have to roll up the film to take a photo."
"You just have to use the spring winder supplied by the Exploration Club. However, that does slow down the shutter. So we had to improve the winder too… This was what we actually had the most trouble with. It cost quite a bit of money too. After all, this is a piece of old lost technology."
Chigozuka sighed in a clearly performed manner.
Other Ecchuu Takaoka club members were going around the audience seats and handing something out.
"First, we'll hand out a prototype set to every school as a souvenir. The set contains a turret shutter, an exclusive release cable, a camera bridge, and a high-speed winder. The film can be easily combined together with an ordinary image processing application, but the automatic film developing device installed at every Exploration Club can have a burst photography mode added to it, so if you install it, you'll be fine."
A female club member came over to Homura as well and delicately handed her a cardboard box.
"Ah, thank you very much."
Homura quickly opened up the box, and found a user's manual contained inside along with the aforementioned equipment. It was a painstaking piece of work that was meticulously made (in a weird way), with a four-panel comic that contained personified characters of the equipment.
"We intend to offer this prototype to other countries while continuing to focus on improving it. I hope you will all allow me to hear your impressions of using it in the future. Once you get accustomed to it, you don't even need a tripod or release cable to take pictures."
Touya poked Homura as she unconsciously got caught up in reading the manual's comic.
"Then, to summarize, we've completed the first stage of our objective to 'easily and cheaply take color photos' for the time being. For the coming year, we plan to follow the initiative of our club's second year students and focus on something else entirely—"
Briefly pausing, Chigozuka looked over the audience.

“After constructing this prototype and conversing with the optics manufacturer that aided us, all of our club members had a certain thought. …Are we young investigators aiming to be excellent cameramen? Will we eventually end up filming a genuine documentary? Certainly, it’s possible. Displaying showy accomplishments that can convince the citizens who pay us with their taxes is our joy. I certainly think that’s part of it. But, though this may seem like I’m refuting our own actions… That’s not all there is to it. We want people to truly realize that Nutella is already closer to us than the moon or the North and South Poles; that Nutella is a world that adjoins our Earth. And I believe we work as investigators in order to show them that humans like us are out there exploring it.

“We aren’t cameras with hands and feet. Nor are we resource-excavating robots. We’re humans. Each and every one of us is a human who is interested by an unknown world, who works hard, and who experiences the joy and satisfaction of accomplishing something—I think that showing people that challenging spirit is important.”

Placing her hands on her knees, Chigozuka bowed deeply and expressed her thanks to the audience for listening.

After Ecchuu Takaoka’s presentation, another presentation that was of great interest to Homura was the one by Hamamatsu Central.

Rather, it would be more accurate to say that it excited her.

First, their entrance onto the stage was flashy. The club president purposefully rode into the auditorium on a bicycle wearing a helmet and protectors, entering with his front wheel raised high in a wheelie, and then finally sprang up onto the stage with an unassisted jump.

The club members in the audience let out a huge applause, but many people in the VIP seats widened their eyes in shock, and the moderating assistant Nagashino flew into a panic with teary eyes.

The rider took off his helmet, revealing the tanned face of a male student.

“I’m Kamio from Hamamatsu Central Engineering. Our base camp is located in a region of soft, even terrain with lots of hills and open fields. Because of that, we adopted mountain bikes like this as a means of transportation for our club activities since three years ago, as a test case for future widespread use.”

Kamio got off from his bicycle and proudly showed off the gallant figure of the firm and thick-frame mountain bike painted in sharply contrasting colors.

“As you all know, Japanese Exploration Clubs mainly move by foot. We too have not yet been given permission to ride our mountain bikes into unexplored regions. Even so, it’s a fact that these have rapidly expanded the range of our exploration activities and allowed us to effectively use the length of each of our stays on Nutellas.

“There are actually various different transportation methods used by other Exploration Clubs overseas. On water, they use canoes and sailing boats. In

air, they use paragliders, hang-gliders, and, by a select few clubs, hot-air balloons."
—*Hmm.* Homura dreamily imagined herself using those methods. Soaring through the air like a bird, and gliding through the waves. However, the next instant, her imagined self was hit by unexpected troubles in her mind. It appeared her experiences on Nutella and her trials with the Exploration Club had made her realize how the world didn't revolve around her. Like that theory by Galileo Galilei.
Homura's attention returned to Kamio's presentation.
"Umm, them how about on land? Right now, mountain bikes are the most plausible method. Electric bikes are of course out of the question due to the issue of battery, and we have yet to clear the issue of fuel supply for motorcycles and automobiles.
"Our club, which is the first to use mountain bikes on Nutella in Japan, learned the idea from another school. Our presentation this year contains the results from our collaborative research with an Exploration Club at a Texan school in the US. The theme is 'a practical engine for use on Nutella'."
What followed was an engineering explanation by Kamio.
It was difficult to bring gasoline to Nutella or extract it from the land on site. Therefore, until recent years, they had explored solutions by working on making an engine that ran on biomass ethanol fuel, alcohol, in other words.
However, an alcohol-running engine was difficult to service, and continuously securing good quality fuel was also an issue. The situation was the same with an engine that ran on charcoal, which had seemed easy to obtain at first glance.
When asked the barefaced question "What happened to the unused alcohol *fuel* that was left over?", Kamio played dumb and said "Huh? What are you talking about?". Homura could have sworn that Misasagi-senpai had casually leaned forward and paid extra attention to that part.
"Even supposing that we managed to use automobiles and motorbikes on Nutella, what would we do if the engine failed and broke while on a long distance expedition in a land too far away to return by foot?
"We Hamamatsu club members research techniques and technology that would allow us to repair a vehicle on site if there's trouble with it. However, we don't seek to impose this on all Exploration Club members, since it would be inefficient.
"That's not all. Being injured in a way that proves an impediment to operating a vehicle is also chillingly possible. The most common and likely danger is inadvertently ending up in terrain that impedes the functioning of the vehicle and being unable to turn back.
"This is the main reason why travel by foot is still endorsed in Japan. In oversea countries, there are other reasons as well. In places like Europe, where their base camps are comparatively concentrated at high latitudes in

the north where the gravity is heavier, it's necessary to secure mobility even at the cost of safety during movement, so the circumstances are different there."

The issue of gravity came up again…

Before, Homura had mainly been concerned about her personal body weight, but this topic made her suddenly wonder how things must be for countries even further north than Europe.

Meanwhile, other Hamamatsu Central club members brought a metal engine model onto the stage.

After they ignited the kind of common solid fuel used at camps located within the lower part of the model, the engine started lightly thrumming.

"A Star Ring engine—I think there are people here who have heard the term before. Instead of an internal combustion engine, it's an external combustion engine. This engine can only generate low torque as yet, but the fact that it doesn't require a specific kind of fuel makes it very advantageous on Nutella.

"At the Texan school, they have already designed an improved version for use on Nutella and succeeded in operating a small single-seater cycle car with it."

On the screen, a video of the cycle car moving in action appeared, supplied from the Texan school. It appeared to have been shot with a small movie camera, and the video quality wasn't that great. It was like a silent film from the last century.

Running across a dry plain was a small car with an exposed frame that was reminiscent of the Apollo Mission's moon rovers.

Behind the single seat for the driver was a luggage rack containing food and kindling for fuel, and it progressed at the speed of a running human.

"I wish I had one of those!" many envious exclaimed from the audience.

However, they realized that it wasn't as straightforward as it looked when they saw the following still images and documents.

Apparently, the Exploration Club members had to push it when travelling over a hill. It also stumbled and fell over on uneven terrain.

"It depends on the terrain, but it's still ideal for making round trips between base camps to transport materials. It's also convenient for transporting injured members. If we choose the terrain and secure a safe route, it can be put to practical use on Nutella even now.

"The last thing we will introduce is the project that Yuuji from our club and Miyada-kun from Tazatani High have developed using the results of the Texas school as a reference."

The club members carefully brought a model airplane on stage.

Its propellers were powered by a super miniature Star Ring engine.

"This airplane lacks sufficient thrust to fly on Earth, but on Nutella, it can fly with a small camera attached. It works by sealing high-pressure gas that's converted into propulsive gas within the engine's cylinders."

The next video on the screen showed the airplane flying while circling through the air.
It couldn’t be remote-controlled like a toy airplane, but it was still quite a bracing sight to see.
“There are still several issues we need to overcome until we can fly a Nutellan light flyer that humans can ride. With no radio or airfields on Nutella, it’ll take a lot of time and effort before we can safely fly any aircraft there. However, transportation methods to replace travel by foot are an absolute must if we are to conquer Nutella’s overwhelmingly vast land. Our club will continue to search for possibilities in that area—The report on this Star Ring engine unit will be discussed again in several other subcommittee meetings, so I suggest you attend those as well.”
Chapter 4 END

hiiiii!
rumble rumble
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TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) Aristarchus was an ancient Greek astronomer and mathematician who presented the first known heliocentric model of the universe.

(2) The exclamation “Nii” (also the word for “two”) is often used like “Cheese!” in front of a camera in Japan.

(3) “Knee” is pronounced in its English form here, coming out as “Nii” like last time.

Chapter 5

The dining hall within the lodging facilities.
Homura and the rest of the Seiran High Exploration Club each took one of the lunch trays lined up on the cafeteria counter and sat down to eat at a long table.
Truthfully, Homura would have preferred to sit on the outside terrace, but the seats there were already packed. Lively conversation could be heard from the many Exploration Club members sitting under the parasols there.
The members there were limited to schools that had already finished their presentations, and they had an obvious air of liberation about them.
The schools that would be doing their presentations in the afternoon were seated within the hall, each group absorbed in preparatory meetings amongst their club members.
But without paying that tension any mind, the sunlight brilliantly shone through the windows along with the smell of the tide and the roar of the waves.
"……Mumu… There's something wrong about this…"
Homura narrowed her eyes while enjoying the springy texture of her peanut tofu.
Glimpses of Iriomote Island's blue sea and white waves could be seen past the palm trees outside.
"Such a beautiful ocean is right over there, and yet here we are… When we will be able to go swimming?"
She glanced enviously out the window and strained her ears in an exaggerated manner.
"We still haven't done that standard tradition, you know?"
"…Standard tradition?" Touya tilted his head in puzzlement.
"Ah, I know, you mean that," said Ameno in realization.
She and Homura linked hands and, after taking a deep breath, lifted their arms up and shouted "It's the sea!" with glittering expressions, before bringing their hands back down to the table with a bang after a few seconds.
"…It's tradition to shout that while jumping into the air in swimsuits."
"Right."
"……"
Touya wore his usual expression of disbelief and exasperation, but there was a hint of sympathy there too.
"I know how you feel, but there's no way we'll get the chance while it's still bright out, you know? The presentations are going to continue all afternoon. Besides, it'll finally be our turn next."

Homura had already become used to these sound arguments of Touya's that she simply brushed it off with a triumphant look.
"Well, I was just joking—but even so, all the other schools are really amazing. They all prepared various things and even gave out souvenirs. It's almost overwhelming."
Ameno nodded in open agreement at Homura.
"They were really interesting. Each individual presentation was short, but they included new information that still hasn't been made public, and they were truly a lot of fun to listen to! I was especially intrigued by the Nagato Fisheries School Exploration Club's presentation on the creatures in coastal ecosystems."
"I wasn't able to deal with that presentation myself… The CG models of fish were pretty, but I'm no good with slimy and slippery creatures…"
"That so? But weren't they cute? And you should check out the toxicity levels and cooking preparation techniques for those kinds of creatures too, Homura-san."
"Please spare me that kind of variety show display…"
Just remembering the presentation's images gave Homura goosebumps.
"Hey, calling it a variety show is rude," interjected Touya, who had been impressed by the presentation just as much as Ameno. "How to put it? The presentation itself wasn't particularly sensational… but the contents of their routine activities were thick and abundant. That's why I was honestly more shocked than interested by it. Like, it made me reflect on myself."
Those words pricked at Homura's heart, but she maintained her outward calm.
"It's fine if we go at our own pace. Our own exploration has just gotten started, after all."
"No, you should feel at least some inferiority on that point. In the first place, you're acting quite carefree just because you're not going on stage, Hinooka."
"Even if you say that, there's nothing for me to actually do for our presentation. Misasagi-senpai is taking care of the speech, Touya-kun is in charge of presenting the image and video material on the screen—so there's nothing left for me to do, right?"
That was certainly true.
The last member, Ameno, was busy with organizing the materials for the presentation.
As such, Homura felt quite left out during their club's preparatory meeting last night.
"Your job is the stay silent so that you don't say anything unnecessary, Hinooka."
"Ah, so cruel. I'm a member of the Seiran High Exploration Club too, you know."
"You are?"
Annoyed, Homura stole a papaya jelly from Touya's tray.

“Hey!”
“Hmm~, it’s a bit meager… Speaking of which, about the Mikawakotobuki High club… there was a foreigner among them. I didn’t notice him at first since he really blended in with them, though.”
“Ah, I talked with that person a bit on the boat yesterday. He’s a second year student.”
“He’s an exchange student from Eton College in England,” Ameno explained. “They’ve been accepting them into Japanese Exploration Clubs for the past few years now apparently.”
“Eton? Like what they use to make boots?” That was sheepskin. “The Wildlife Chronicles?” That was Seton[1]. “…Well, whatever. So there are even exchange students among the Exploration Club, huh?”
“What’s with the surprise? You might end up going off as one someday yourself, you know?”
“To a school in another country? Ahaha, no way, no way. There’s no point in worrying about things like that[2].”
“But it’s not like it has nothing to do with us at all. Even these presentations reach beyond just the Japanese branch.”
Fujimori-sensei murmured as she stuffed her cheeks with pork belly stew.
“Just between us, our club’s presentation is the main act today. There will be double the number of VIP guests present in the afternoon session.”
“…Really?”
Fujimori nodded meekly at the shocked Homura.
“Seiran High is the main act? Eeh… but there are still five other schools left to present…”
“Are you, tired, Hinooka-san?”
Misasagi-senpai showed concern for the exhausted-looking Homura.
Homura nodded in embarrassment.
“Just a bit… Even though all I’ve done is sit, ahaha. It’s like, even if I listen, most of it just sounds like gibberish to me… The presentations just don’t seem to enter my head, probably because I lack enough knowledge and imagination. But—”
Mindful of the expressions of the other Seiran High Exploration Club members around her at the table, Homura continued.
“The most interesting, or rather, refreshing part was learning that there were all kinds of people in the Exploration Club.”
“I think that’s, wonderful.” Misasagi-senpai’s smile looked truly happy at Homura’s words.
“…Thank you, senpai.”
It was then that Homura suddenly noticed that Misasagi had barely touched any of her meal.
Touya also seemed to have noticed that.
“Senpai, you’re not going to eat? Do you not like Okinawan cuisine?”
“I don’t have, much appetite, right now…”

Misasagi's forlorn smile at the moment pained Homura. Fujimori was also looking at her worriedly.
Speaking of which, Homura still hadn't resolved the misunderstanding with Kanae Yuri who suspected Homura of being the one who threw a cup at her while she dozed. Currently, there was no sign of her or the true culprit Hayase-senpai anywhere in the dining hall.
Homura wanted to resolve the misunderstanding before the SA ended, but unbeknownst to her, a sticky situation that went beyond a mere prank soon awaited her.
The afternoon presentations started right on time.
At the back of the auditorium, there were now additional video cameras set up besides the ones originally there for record-keeping.
Just as Fujimori predicted, the VIP seats were now packed full, and additional unexpected visitors were made to watch while standing near the walls. This crowd further increased with the last-minute rush of people entering the hall. There were no journalists here from the start. That huge crowd was comprised solely of government and UN officials associated with Nutella.
"Now then, I suppose we should get started—"
Amidst the solemn atmosphere in the hall, Tenryuu casually jumped up on stage.
The gathering's moderator Oozore tensed and watched him warily.
Paying no mind to his vice-president's concern, Tenryuu spoke with the same relaxed atmosphere he'd displayed in the plane. First, he welcomed the newcomers in the audience as the Japanese Exploration Club representative, and then restated that the primary goal of this Summer Session was the mutual information exchange and mingling between Japanese investigators.
He went on to confirm that a period for listening to detailed questions and requests for ministry officials would be held later, before moving onto the main topic.
"—Now then, allow me to introduce the top batter for the afternoon, Seiran High club president Misasagi Mayo."
Within the hall's oppressive atmosphere that remained even after Tenryuu's casual introduction, the presentation began.
The Seiran High Exploration Club members walked on stage.
Homura, who remained in her seat, looked at the stage in breathless suspense, as if she were the one standing up there. Ameno, who had also stayed behind next to her, leaned forward and watched the stage excitedly.
Misasagi-senpai slowly and gracefully walked on stage and went to stand at the podium in the center.
Touya sat down next to her and opened up a laptop. He was obviously stiff and nervous.

Fujimori-sensei, in her role as a mere advisor, sat further back from them. She sat slovenly as if she had come to watch a baseball game with a beer in one hand, her bad manners the same as in the classroom.
However, out of the corner of her eye, Homura noticed many people in the guest seats react to Fujimori-sensei's entrance on stage. Some smiled as if seeing a familiar face while others frowned as if facing a formidable enemy, ranging equally from Japanese to foreign officials.
……Mori-chan really is well known, huh?
Homura then glanced at the Hiyoshizaka High group sitting next to her, but there was no sign of Kanae Yuri, who had kept her back turned to Homura all morning.
When her gaze met Hayase's, he seemed to guess Homura's question and merely said "she ran off" with a shrug.
"—Ehem."
No time was left for her to ask Hayase the reason for Kanae's absence as senpai's cute-sounding cough rang through the speakers all over the hall. Homura hurriedly returned her attention to the stage.
"I'm Misasagi from Seiran High—"
As Misasagi said that and bowed her head gracefully, she honestly looked small and slightly unreliable somehow to Homura's eyes.
"I believe all club presidents have already been notified, but I will announce it once again here.
"On *** in Japanese time and *** of the third spring in Nutella time, investigators from Seiran High and Hiyoshizaka High encountered a Nutellan in *** area under Kanto jurisdiction within the *** continent under the Japanese branch's sphere of activity—"
Excited cheers reflexively rang out among the audience at the first official report to come out of Misasagi's mouth.
I-It's time!
Those cheers were the reaction that Homura had long awaited.
—However, those cheers were sucked away into a still silence far more quickly than she'd imagined.
That was only natural, as virtually none of the upperclassmen in the audience had reacted to Misasagi's speech.
The atmosphere was completely different from the other presentations until now. Even if they had already known about the contents of this presentation, this silence was still far too extreme.
Ameno looked around the hall in shock. One first year (Otomaru-kun) who had overeagerly stood up from his chair awkwardly sat back down.
…What's with… this atmosphere…?
As feelings of confusion spread among others besides Homura, the last of the sparse cheers from first year students faded away. A strained atmosphere enveloped the hall that made the peaceful atmosphere from this morning seem like a lie.

Even as Misasagi continued her speech on stage, neither she nor Fujimori-sensei showed any sign of being shaken by this. Only Touya was glaring at the rest of the assembly hall with a disbelieving expression that was as plain as day.
Homura was just as bewildered as him.
It was true that this was an important announcement, but was it really something so delicate to touch upon that everyone would become this serious and treat any and all noisemaking as indiscreet? It made her all the more suspicious.
What is this…? It's so weird…
Pulling herself together, Homura stared at Misasagi-senpai while clenching her hands in the face of this unfamiliar atmosphere.
It took Homura a while later to realize that senpai was speaking smoothly without her usual halting tone.
"—This Nutellan called herself 'Subaru'. This is a Japanese name. It refers to the Pleiades in English. The name means 'heavenly bodies', coming from the phrase 'The stars are Subaru' in the Pillow Book[3]—"
The contents of the report involved events that Homura herself experienced, all of it still fresh in her mind.
The process from initial discovery to negotiations.
The distinctive outward traits of Nutellans. The conditions of their homes and lifestyle.
The exceedingly long lifespan of Nutellans.
The fact that Subaru-hime herself had lived in isolation for a long time.
The fact that it was possible for Nutellans to have children with Earthlings, and that Subaru-hime's father had been a Japanese man from the Edo era.
Etcetera, etcetera.
—All of these things were only summarized briefly, but the presentation contained and organized all the information that could currently be confirmed. Translations by interpreters were also conducted at the same time.
Included as well were conjectures based on Misasagi's experience as an investigator that couldn't yet be confirmed and information that they'd only heard second-hand through Subaru. Misasagi had made sure to warn the audience of this before speaking of them.
The photos that Homura had taken were displayed on the large screen.
One was taken on the day they'd gone to pick up Suzuran on Nutella.
It was more like a carefree snapshot than a proper record photo, clearly taken without any regard for keeping the picture level.
When the kimono-dressed Subaru-hime appeared standing beside a huge pure white wolf on screen, Homura could viscerally feel the breaths sucked in by everyone in the hall.
That was the reaction she'd been expecting and hoping for—
When she looked over the photo purely as a photographer, it was an awkward and embarrassing piece of photography, but it powerfully

conveyed the deep impressions that had been carved into her heart on Nutella.
Homura and Touya's names did not come up in the report.
The stranded child Suzuran who they'd encountered on Nutella was also simply introduced as a missing child of unknown age.
The only moment one of their names was directly brought up was regarding the subject of how Misasagi-senpai herself was related by blood to the Nutellan in question from long ago in her ancestry.
The Seiran High presentation was smoothly conducted.
At that point, Misasagi-senpai halted her speech for a moment.
Nagashino, who had seemed stiff and uncomfortable during the entire presentation, then announced that they would be starting a questions-and-answers session in a strained tone of voice.
Just as Homura expected, the entire hall was silent.
As everyone seemed to carefully scrutinize the information and cautiously examine each other's attitudes, a single hand was raised and limply waved in the air.
"Go ahead, Nana-senpai—ah, I mean Nanakubo-san…"
As Nagashino turned red-faced at saying that nickname out of habit, a long-haired girl wearing headphones feebly stood up.
Behind her glasses was a slightly hard-looking gaze.
"I'm Nanakubo, a second year and low-ranking club member at Nagumo High. I've understood the gist of everything. So, I'd like to ask what Seiran High plans to do next."
"Of course. First, we plan to, prioritize rebuilding, our base camp as, an urgent matter."
…Senpai's usual halting tone had returned.
"We've already contacted, the UNPIEP headquarters to request, the construction of a new, Transport Ring."
"So you're waiting for them to issue you one of Dr. Chandra's transport keys, huh? Then that means you still haven't settled on a location to set up a base nearest to the Nutellan. Then let me ask about your plans after that. What do the second and first year members of Seiran High's club think? Do you have a vision for your future investigations? Or do you plan to stop exploring new unknown regions and shift to focusing on cultural exchange?"
"I don't think that's, something we should decide, by ourselves yet."
"Ah, is that so? But, after all, you can't say that it's fair and impartial for an investigator who's related to the Nutellan in question to be in charge of investigating her. It'd make things difficult if something inconvenient happened with the Nutellan, right?"
"N-Nanakubo-san, if you have more than one question, please sit down and wait your turn again later."
"I'm just asking what everyone else is already thinking, though?"
Nanakubo coolly ignored Nagashino's warning.

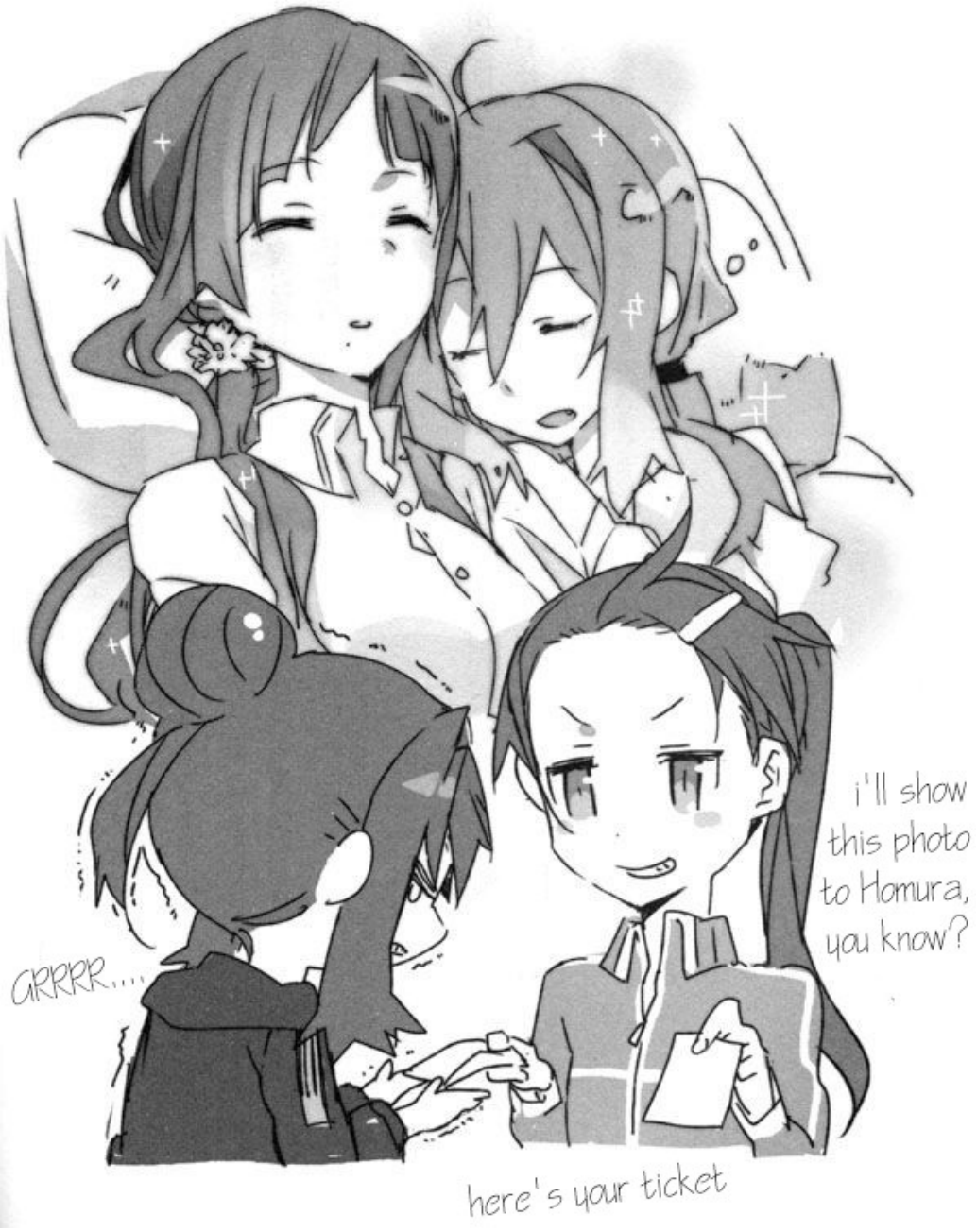
Unable to let this insolence pass, Oozore reprimanded him further.
“What are you trying to do, Nanakubo? Do you have no intention of cooperating with the moderators of this assembly?”
“Aren’t you the one who most wants probe into this subject, Oozore-san?”
“That’s a separate matter entirely.”
There was a short silence.
As Oozore stared at her with sternly pursed lips, Nanakubo eventually gave in to the pressure and sat down disagreeably.
……
That short exchange between Nanakubo and Oozore seemed to reflected the internal discord within Nagumo High’s club, the pressure enough to give a third party like Homura a cold sweat.
However, Homura noticed that, as Nanakubo stared at Oozore like a petulant child after surrendering in the face of the vice-president’s pressure, her expression contained more than simple rebelliousness; there was also a hint of expectation.
What kind of effect would a demonstration showing how club members couldn’t be controlled by the moderators in front of government officials have on everyone present…? Homura still hadn’t thought that far, though.
For a while, no hands were raised, as if to support Nanakubo’s words, but eventually one person tentatively raised their arm.
After being given permission by the moderators, a slender female student with slopped shoulders stood up.
“I’m Shiragiku, the Kanazawa Asano High club president. I have a proposal regarding the investigation centered around the Nutellan from now on. I’d like to ask that you accept representatives from every school to join in on the investigation.”
“Of course. For that, too, the increase of, Transport Rings, and a secure base, will be necessary.”
Misasagi reflexively agreed to the proposal, but that discussion was a still bit too far ahead to be settled on right now.
The moderating aid Nagashino promptly asked for that bit to be stricken from the record and warned the questioner.
“President Shiragiku, please leave any concrete requests for the club president meeting later tonight. Please limit yourself to basic questions for now.”
“Then, what I wish to say is… I and the other members of the Kanazawa Asano Exploration Club want to directly meet this Nutellan.”
“……”
Nagashino inadvertently turned speechless. Nods of agreement spread throughout the hall.
Bewildered, Touya turned around questioningly, but the advisor Fujimori kept her arms folded behind her head and reclined in her chair with no change.
It seemed that she had no intention of interjecting.

At this point, Homura's expectations had been completely overturned.
At first, she'd just thought that the profile of an inhabitant of another word, the Nutellan Subaru-hime, would garner interest and excitement. Like a movie actress or a famous celebrity.
Misasagi-senpai had explained the basics of her and her situation, but that was merely a summary, nowhere near enough to satisfy everyone's curiosity.
In the first place, Homura had yet to interact enough with Subaru-hime to her own satisfaction either.
—Princess Iotsumisumaru.
The woman who Suzuran called Hime and had lived a life of solitude for a thousand years.
"Now, now, wait a bit. I understand everyone's feelings of dissatisfaction, but there's no point in reproducing the snatching competition between major powers from before the Antarctic Treaty here."
Tenryuu stepped forward to intercede.
However, at that moment, accompanied by a huge sneeze—
"Achoo… It's not pointless! Keeping quiet here is the same as losing!"
A voice that Homura recognized rang out through the hall from the back.
Whispers of "Who's that?" and "I can't see" echoed through the hall.
A short-statured girl pushed her way through the crowd of people standing at the back of the hall and spoke up again as she stood atop one of the backmost audience seats.
"You guys, even if she stole a march on you all, try to tone down your jealousy of Mayo, all right?"
……Inari-senpai!
Homura gasped. That was definitely Inari Sunao. Wearing the Seiran High uniform for the first time since Homura had met her, Inari continued to walk over the audience desks.
"First of all, get down from the desk, Inari," warned Oozore.
"I only climbed up because they said they couldn't see me!"
She casually jumped down to the audience aisle and calmly headed to the stage, many voices calling out from behind at the sight of her familiar small back.
"Inari!?"
"Sunao-chan…!"
"You're late, idiot!"
"What did you come here for, you shorty fox!?"
"Is she a child that got lost from her elementary school field trip?"
"Someone call the zoo caretakers. A special natural souvenir ran away!"
…Those were the kinds of merciless comments that came her way.
Nanakubo visibly clicked her tongue. However, Homura felt like there was affectionate warmth and happy surprise contained within each of those voices.
"Inari…san."

Misasagi unconsciously slipped out her name while standing frozen on the stage.
The dumbfounded Nagashino finally managed to speak up.
“Seiran High’s Inari-san… correct? Have you returned to the club? Actually, are your injuries all right now?”
“Can I borrow a tiepin mike? I’m tired of yelling at these guys.”
“S-Sure.”
Overpowered by Inari’s intensity, Nagashino hurriedly handed her a spare mike.
“Umm, just to confirm, Inari-senpai, this is technically a nationally classified meeting, so do you have p-permission to be here—?”
“I called her here,” Fujimori announced.
In Inari’s lightly raised hand was a guest ID card of a different color than those belonging to investigators.
“Welcome back, Inari—however, we’re in the middle of Misasagi’s presentation right now.”
Tenryuu spoke to Inari in a cool voice.
“…You too…?”
Inari glared harshly at Tenryuu.
“Tenryuu… whose representative are you? The representative all the investigators here? Or are you just a cheap signboard hung up by the adults? Am I wrong?”
And then Inari turned to stare at Misasagi-senpai next. Misasagi was staring down at the manuscript in her hands with her lips tightly pursed.
“Mayo…”
—Homura could have sworn she heard Inari quietly murmur that single entreating word that only reached up on stage
Holding the offered mike between her fingers, Inari, despite her earlier words, then began to shout in a resounding voice at the entire hall.
“In the end, do you people simply not want to make waves? That’s just doing what the adults tell you. Just what did all you come here from all over Japan for?”
Glaring challengingly at Tenryuu, Oozore and the entire assembly hall in turn, Inari then turned to her gaze to Touya beside her.
“All right! Touya, lend me that Q&A summary! And Homura! Why the heck are you sitting over there while I’m standing here? Come on over!”
“……Eeeeh!?”
Homura stood up with a start, causing all eyes to gather upon her.
“Kuku, when that’s girl’s present, the only thing you can do is resolve yourself and give in.”
Kamikoma laughed and pushed the bewildered Homura’s back with a slap.
“In that case, I should also go on stage, right? Right?”
Unable to wait any longer, Ameno pushed Homura from behind and accompanied her to the stage.

As Homura timidly walked onto the stage, Inari spoke while looking straight at her.
“You’re an investigator, aren’t you, Homura? You went to Nutella. You weren’t made to go there. You went there with your own two feet! You can talk about all your hardships and painful experiences on Nutella here. Everyone wants to hear it.”
“Eeh, but recounting my hardships is a bit… And besides, I didn’t prepare any manuscript to read off of!”
“What, you need something like that?”
“I have it.”
This time Misasagi-senpai interjected. Her expression was still a bit sullen.
“—I also, prepared a, manuscript for, you too, Hinooka-san.”
“What!?”
Just when did she make that…? As Homura stood there dumbfounded, Inari passed her and stood before Misasagi.
“Like I thought. This is the real one, right…? Geez…”
“……”
Inari took the manuscript from the silent Misasagi’s hands—though she did stubbornly resist handing it over a little at first—and then Inari pushed the papers onto Homura along with the mike.
—It contained the record of Hinooka Homura and Touya Takumi’s adventure, which had been omitted from the earlier announcement.
This was the account they had told to Misasagi and Ameno after they safely returned to the club building on Earth. They had talked together all night long after school hours, eating the tea cakes on the desk as they talked and adding in jokes every once in a while.
It was an unorganized account full of derailments, which was why they had hesitated to add it to the club president’s log, and yet Misasagi-senpai had written it all down with great care.
“Eh… Eeeh… Err… T-T-T-Touya-kun…?”
Homura was utterly flustered, uncertain where to begin from as she was bathed in the audience’s eager expectations.
Even when looked to Touya for help, he appeared greatly perplexed himself as he looked back at her.
“Sorry, Hinooka… If you give up at some point, I’ll switch with you partway through.”
“I give up.”
“Well, do your best.”
—On the other hand, the moderating assistant Nagashino also looked at a loss as she turned to seek instructions from the people in charge of the meeting, but Oozore was just looking up at the ceiling at this point and Tenryuu merely shrugged with a grin.
“I-Is this really all right? …In that case, please continue with the presentation…”
Still full of uncertainty, Nagashino hugged her stomach from the stress.

Chapter 5 END


i'll show this photo to Homura, you know?
GRRRR....
here's your ticket

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) Ernest Thompson Seton: famous American author and wildlife artist. In Japan, his works as a whole are referred to as the “Seton Wildlife Chronicles”.

(2) In this sentence, Homura uses a piece of Okinawan slang, which roughly as “things will work out somehow”, but the exact meaning is a bit too complex to properly express in the English language in a single sentence, so the translation here has been unfortunately dumbed down to make sense in this context.

(3) The Pillow Book is a book of observations and musings recorded by Sei Shōnagon during her time as court lady to Empress Consort Teishi during the 990s and early 1000s in Heian Japan.

Chapter 6

Even after that tumultuous announcement, the meeting continued on with the presentation from other schools.
A lot of the first years were left bewildered by it, but the senior club members kept going normally as if that dispute had been an expected part of the program.
During the brief break after Seiran High's presentation, Fujimori-sensei and Misasagi-senpai left the hall and went to a separate meeting room along with the advisor for Nagumo High's club. Most of the visitors who had flooded into the hall during the afternoon session also headed over there.
According to Ameno, they were resuming the report on the encounter with the Nutellan in more detail over there.
Homura, Touya, Ameno and Inari were left out of this part of the report and remained behind in the auditorium.
Homura felt guilty towards the other school clubs doing their presentations since the gallery had shrunk considerably, but that was apparently needless worry on her part.
In fact, the remaining presentations were even more animated and excited than before, like a class left to self-study. It was almost as if they had taken no notice of the VIP seats from the start.
When the applause was delivered for the final presentation by Tazatani High, it was time for the ending speech, and Oozore respectfully called the name of the final speaker.
"Please welcome the chairman of the Imaginary Earth Task Force Committee, Member of the Diet and the House of Councillors, Councillor Misasagi Yoshihiro."
A man with grizzled hair wearing a suit stood up and headed to the stage while walking with a cane.
Now that Homura thought of it, that man had been sitting in the most conspicuous seat in the VIP seats, yet had quietly watched the presentations without interjecting a single time.
"D-Diet member? And… Misasagi!?"
"……*nod, nod*."
Touya nodded, his eyes clearly saying, "That's right. What are you asking at this late hour?"
As Homura was still having trouble believing it, Inari quietly spoke up next to her in Kanae's empty seat while gazing at the stage with her chin resting on her hand.
"…He's Mayo's father. Though he is comparatively old for a parent."
"Have you met him before?"
"Yeah, a few times. He came to last year's SA too."

Just what have I done in front of such an important person? Homura agonized as she gripped her head. Moreover, Misasagi-senpai's father? — And by Diet member, you mean the National Diet!?
That meant that he was also distantly related to Subaru-hime like Misasagi-senpai…
As Homura's mind was in chaos, her eyes were captured by that tall man.
Leaning his cane against the podium and standing dignifiedly on stage, Councillor Misasagi quietly looked over the auditorium.
He had mysterious eyes that seemed to naturally pull in the gazes of the gathered students.
Homura even felt like his gaze had crossed hers in particular for an instant.
"I'm happy to be reunited with all you Nutellan investigators once again this year."
He spoke before the silent audience.
His voice rang out pleasantly like a bow string.
"For us adults, to have you all go to the far off land of Nutella, where there is no guarantee of safety and where no protection can reach you, and have you come back without losing any lives and tell us your on-site reports is our joy. Every one of your smiles is our pride."
The gazes of every single club member were fixed on the councillor.
Koma-senpai, Taga-senpai, Nagashino-senpai with her tablet gripped in her hands, Oozore who stood at attention, Nanakubo who'd been chewing gum with her hands behind her head, and even Tenryuu who'd been leaning back in his chair the whole meeting corrected their postures and were listening attentively with their arms crossed.
……Huh?
Only Inari was slouching idly with one arm propped up against her desk next to Homura. It did suit her position as a sudden intruder, though.
However, her eyes weren't focused on Misasagi-senpai's father, or even the scenery outside the windows. Rather, her gaze was fixed on the side profile of Tenryuu who she'd vehemently argued with earlier.
Though Homura's curiosity was piqued by this, her attention naturally returned to the councillor's speech which pleased the ears.
"—I'll leave the boring greetings at that. I'll have time to talk with the club presidents and third years from every club later. Please look forward to it and wait until then.
"I have two announcements to make here that I'd like all investigators to take to heart.
"First, this isn't public outside of this assembly, but the current government is reforming the register of cabinet ministers. In other words, the heads of each Japanese ministry will be changed over to newly appointed ministers.
"Additionally, the passing of the bill that was previously still in deliberation in the Diet is now almost certain to be approved, and both Houses of Parliament have begun to fine tune it in preparation for the establishment of the new administration. The "Nutellan Development Bureau" will be

launched as an external bureau within the Cabinet Office by the end of the year. You could say that our nation's Nutellan exploration efforts have reached a new stage."
The Nutellan Development Bureau—it sounded like a boorish name, but even Homura could understand the change in mood as many club members leaned forward all at once. It was an omen of something new starting, like a long-awaited hit-number that's finally played at a previously unstirring concert.
"The founding of this bureau follows the trend of similar institutions in the United States, The People's Republic of China and the Republic of India. Though it may be presumptuous of me to say this, current prospects indicate that I will be the one inaugurated as the first director of this bureau."
The councillor bowed his head at the ensuing applause.
"Thank you very much. It's been a long road to get here. Though I say that, I myself have never set foot on Nutella. This is all due to the hard work and trailblazing by all you investigators until now, and thanks to representatives Tenryuu-kun and Oozore-kun's help. I will strive to build up a position that will allow us adults to provide backup to all of you more quickly and effectively."
Oozore silently bowed in gratitude at the praise. However, right as Tenryuu was about to cut loose and speak shamelessly again in the seat next to him, he folded his arms with his head oddly tilted in puzzlement.
"I have another even more joyous announcement.
"The UNPIEP Japanese Branch will be welcoming a new Exploration Club. Sendai Aoba High's Kazuma-kun and Ishinomaki Kanan High's Fukuda-san, if you two could please come up—"
Two students stood up in response to the councillor's call. They were a boy and girl who'd been introduced among the reserve members earlier.
The two of them walked to the stage and moved to stand next to the councillor.
"As Oozore-kun mentioned earlier, they have acted as reserve club members until now by temporarily transferring to Hiyoshizaka High's club.
"While also participating in Hiyoshizaka High's investigations, the two of them independently travelled three thousand kilometers on foot and secured a bridgehead for constructing a new base camp at a site that corresponds to the Sendai district on Nutella.
"At first, the two of them will form their own Exploration Club with Kazuma-kun as the first club president and Fukuda-san transferring over from Ishinomaki, but preparations have already been made to bring in new members starting from the beginning of the next school year.
"According to survey results, there are currently seven confirmed soon-to-graduate middle school students in the area around Sendai who have cleared the necessary IE Response conditions and have expressed a desire

to join the Exploration Club in the future. The new club's future tentatively looks promising.
"Thanks to this, we can also expect that the exploration of the Nutellan region that corresponds to the Tohoku region in Japan, which until now has been limited to long-distance expeditions by Hiyoshizaka High, Ecchuu Takaoka Industrial Arts School and Seiran High's clubs, will progress much more smoothly and quickly now."
Another bout of applause naturally arose from the audience.
The two students seemed to be a third year and second year respectively. In other words, the male student who was announced to become the first club president would be graduating before they would be welcoming in new members next year.
Though clearly nervous, the two of them still looked over the auditorium with pride in their gazes.
Their smiles were directed at the Hiyoshizaka High seats.
Kamikoma-senpai, who sat in the middle of the Hiyoshizaka group, was moved to the verge of tears. Her frivolous mouth which had teased Touya earlier had completely disappeared, as hot tears rolled down her cheeks. Kamikoma clapped in applause herself even as she frequently wiped away tears with the palms of her hands. Her expression contained a mix of pride and loneliness that Homura had never seen from her before.
Taga looked down concernedly at Kamikoma in the seat next to her.
Just before the two Sendai region students left the stage, they bowed their heads and thanked both the councillor and all the members of the Hiyoshizaka High club.
After the applause died down, the councillor turned a hawk-like virile smile at the audience and resumed his speech.
"I heard about the wonderful fruits of many clubs' labors over the course of the presentations here today. However, what are truly irreplaceable are everyone's failures. Failure is your treasure and the true shining fruit of your labors. To fail and make a mistake is embarrassing, pains your heart, and trips you up. Even if you look back on it many years later, you can't beautify or glorify it. Most fortunately, there has yet to be any casualties among the Japanese Exploration Club members. However, there is sure to come a time where we must pay the price for that. There are always failures where there are challenges. At that time, how will we face those sacrifices —? That will be shown by us adults' and all of your attitudes in the face of every day challenges and failures."
When the assembly's program for the day ended, many club members from other schools came over to talk to Inari.
However, Inari didn't respond to her old acquaintances and immediately left the auditorium at a quick pace.
"H-Hey, wait, Inari-senpai—"
Homura hurriedly chased after her. It was like déjà-vu.

“Are you shy after being gone so long?” Teasing voices like that called out from behind, but Homura, who knew of Inari’s wild side that didn’t stop once she got started, only felt uneasy.
After managing to catch up to her in the hallway, Homura desperately tried to keep her from going off.
“Senpai, where are you going?”
“I’m leaving.”
“What, but you just got here!”
“I didn’t come here to sightsee. My job is over. I was asked to come here as a helper from Seiran, in order to give you unreliable first years the push you needed.”
As the two of them continued walking even as they conversed, Touya and Ameno also caught up to them.
Ameno’s eyes widened in surprise and interest at a certain part of Inari’s words just now.
“Job? Does that mean that there was some deal between you and Chiayu-san? What was it? Money!? How much did she promise!?”
“Ah, you’re so noisy. Shut her up, Touya!”
“There are no boats leaving the island at this hour, you know?”
Since that request was too much for him, Touya simply stated the truth instead.
“I’ll walk then.”
“Walk!?” Homura shouted in shock.
Ameno helpfully added, “True, there is a path through the forest to Nakama Port.”
That wasn’t exactly the point, Ameno.
“E-Even so, it’s too reckless to leave when it’s already night! Actually, if you hate being here so much, why did you come in the first place—?”
“The diner at the cafeteria is native Okinawan cuisine, you know?”
Homura and Ameno clung to either side of Inari as they tried to change her mind.
Just as Inari was about to shout in irritation, a foreign UNPIEP official poked his head out from a door and shushed them with a finger to his lips.
They were in front of one of the conference rooms.
From beyond the partially opened door, Misasagi-senpai and Fujimori-senpai could be seen sitting on stage and facing many officials in the audience along with the advisor from Nagumo High, who also acted as the administrative representative of the UNPIEP Japanese Branch.
They were continuing the report on the encounter with the Nutellan.
Even from that brief peek through the door, the question and answer session was clearly heated. It was definitely not the kind of atmosphere you could lightly barge into.
Inari and Homura suddenly stopped there and looked inside the room for a little while.

Moving her hand from Inari's shoulder to her arm, Homura let out a sigh before turning to plead with her.
"…At least go and talk with Misasagi-senpai."
"Don't wanna. There's nothing for us to talk about anyway. I only reluctantly came here because Mori-chan called me; it's not like I came to meet Mayo."
"You're still saying that after coming all this way…?"
Inari resumed walking.
When they stepped through the front entrance of the lodging house, the sky of the southern island was dyed a deep red in sunset.
Inari shook off Homura and Ameno's hands and spoke angrily.
"I have no intention of staying the night here. If there's no ferry leaving the island at this hour, I'll just go to a hotel over at the harbor."
"That's on the opposite end of the island, you know? Are you planning to cross through the jungle at night!?"
Inari glared at Homura with a sour look that screamed "Got a problem with that?", but then her expression eased with a sigh.
"I can't stand being here after sticking around for those presentations."
"Eh…"
Inari's expression suddenly turned serious and she gazed at Homura and Touya.
The setting sunlight illuminated the side of her face.
"You probably thought that all the guys from other schools who presented on stage were cool, right? They looked like they were fulfilling important tasks that no one else could do, right?"
"…Yes."
Homura could only nod in agreement.
"But… didn't you also help, senpai?"
"I admit that it doesn't feel bad to victoriously stand on that kind of stage and be praised and applauded. But it's not like any of us are special and chosen humans, though. When you're thrown onto Nutella, everyone is forced to do what they can. You can't survive there without doing that."
"…You're trying to say it's like a cult where everyone monitors each other and doesn't allow anyone to steal a march on the others?" asked Touya quietly.
"That's right! Touya, you've already vaguely noticed it, haven't you? …They use slogans like 'honest hard work to be of use to others' and 'clearing the path for the future' because they're easy for people to understand. You can't even call that volunteerism; it's just instinctually following along like worker ants. It's not a path that you chose for yourself."
"B-But isn't the work done by the Exploration Club a splendid thing?"
Homura would never forget Koma-senpai's proud smile and tears earlier.
"Yeah, it's splendid and all that, great exploits that go above and beyond what's expected of high schoolers. But you'll never reach the bait that's

dangled in front of your eyes. No matter how much you frantically work over the course of three years, nothing is left for you afterwards!”
After spitting out those words, Inari turned towards the forest and swiftly walked off.
“Wait! Touya-kun, help us stop her. It’s almost night time.”
“Even if you say that… That Kintaro girl seems like she could take on even five or ten pit vipers, you know?”
“This isn’t the time to be joking around!”
“That’s right. Please wait, Sunao-san!”
As Inari was getting further and further away, Ameno shouted out to her and ran to catch up to her.
Ameno seemed to intend to change her mind. She took out something from her handbag and fervently spoke to Inari.
However, after less than a minute of talking, she walked back to Homura and Touya.
Ameno returned with quite a pleased look on her face, while Homura looked at her in shock.
“…What happened, Ame-chan?”
“She said ‘Thanks, I’m very much indebted to you’ to me!”
“Huh?”
“I was worried that she wouldn’t be able to see her footing on the forest path in the dark, so I gave her the flashlight, first-aid kit and bottled water I was carrying with me just in case!”
Ameno smiled and blushed proudly.
“I said stop her, not encourage her to leave even more!”
“…Geez, it can’t be helped.”
Touya scratched the back of his head and began walking while confirming the time on his terminal.
“Hinooka, Ameno, you guys head on back. I’ll take care of Inari-senpai somehow.”
“I’ll go too…” protested Homura.
“It’s fine. I can’t have you guys participating in some strange contest of stubbornness too. Go back and inform Mori-chan.”
“W-What about dinner? The wonderful Okinawan cuisine dinner!?”
Touya didn’t respond to Homura as he walked away, and after he confirmed that his terminal’s flashlight function was working he held it out above his head to illuminate his path and disappeared into the forest.
“It’ll be fine if we leave things to Takumi-san. As long as he has his terminal, he can communicate with us anywhere on the island.”
“…Really…?”
Back at the lodging house’s dining hall once again.
In the end, Homura and Ameno ate dinner by themselves.
Naturally, since Ameno couldn’t eat, Homura ended up being the only one eating.

Even though it was the first day of the SA presentations, it was quite a lonely dinner.
Even the variety of local dishes tasted dull when she was eating by herself… Outside the windows was the dark forest, illuminated by the half-moon and the lights of boats and freighters that flickered on the horizon.
Ameno was innocently peering at Homura's dishes from the seat across from her. Before sitting down, she had plugged in a power cable and adapter into a nearby wall socket and inserted the other end inside her parka.
"That's to recharge your battery, right, Ame-chan? Kinda like your version of a meal, I guess? I haven't seen you do it before at the club building, though."
"Ah, yeah. For normal everyday activities, it's enough for me to just recharge at night at Chiayu-san's room or my home at the research laboratory."
The battery charge indicator on the adapter was still less than 50% full.
"Hmm, so you take one meal per day, basically. There's no way I could do that… Does Okinawan electricity taste different from what you're used to? What's it like?"
"Yes… it's quite unique. It's powerful, but also tastes rough, perhaps because a lot of power is being used simultaneously throughout this facility tonight. It tastes different from the smoothness of mainland electricity. You want to give it a taste too, Homura-san?"
Saying that, Ameno took out the white triangular cable port from her parka.
"No, no, no, that might be a bit too stimulating for me."
Ameno appeared to recharge through a conductive point on the skin of her abdomen by sticking the cable port against it.
"Ah, but I'll be switching to a special high capacity, metal–air battery[1] when on Nutella, so I'll be able to be active for much longer over there, you know?"
"But won't the battery break if you bring it to Nutella? During a lot of the presentations today, they were talking about how things would be much easier if they could use electricity over there."
"It apparently took five years for researchers to clear the issue of the battery breaking. At the moment, the only ones they've managed to make work are batteries used by Nutellan probe units that are equipped with autonomous light circuitry like me."
Ameno puffed up her chest proudly.
"Only you, Ame-chan? Just how does that work?"
"If you're interested in the details, you should visit the Honba Institute. The development chief also seemed to be interested in you, Homura-san."
"The Honba Institute is your home, right, Ame-chan? …Wait, the development chief is interested in me?"
Ameno nodded. "According to Chiayu-san, that is," she added with a wry smile.

Ameno stuck her hand under her parka and reaffixed the cable port.
“Back on topic, though, I still have to take occasional ‘snacks’ during the day at public cordless recharge areas, the kind that you and everyone else use for your devices without normally being conscious of it.”
“You mean those things with an electricity mark sticker attached, like at coffee shops, train seats and bus stop benches?”
“Yes. I put my hand over it like this. Though it’s a bit bad manners.”
Ameno put her hand on the desk with her middle and fourth fingers opened outwards to form a V-shape.
Homura nodded in interest.
Since such areas were present all over the city, Homura had never experienced having her portable devices run out of battery herself. As long as she didn’t leave them lying around forgotten and unused for too long, that is.
So she really only became conscious of the act of charging at obvious places like the parking areas for electric bicycles.
“The most delicious kind is the electric vehicle lane at gas stands. I’m addicted to that thick and gorgeous taste… Though I haven’t had much chance to visit them recently when Chiayu-san refuels her car due to the growing trend towards fuel cell vehicles…”
Ameno was absorbed in ecstatically recalling the taste, but then looked around the table in thought.
“But, you know, everyone really is late. At this rate, the president and Chiayu-san will be heading straight for the club president meeting right after their presentation.”
“Eh, it’s already that late?”
True enough, it was almost the scheduled time for the club president meeting centered around third years with official posts in their clubs.
“Touya-kun and Inari-senpai aren’t back yet either. Geez… Just what are those two doing out there?”
“…Are you interested?”
“What’s with those eyes?”
After that uneasy dinner, Homura left the dining hall and went to look around the lodging house.
Most Exploration Club members seemed to have returned to their rooms, leaving the hallways silent.
Not in the mood to return to her own room yet, Homura just wandered around aimlessly.
“If it isn’t Hinooka. Are you alone? Where’s Touya?”
The person who called out to her was Otomaru from Kanazawa Asano High.
Accompanying him was Himekawa from Tomakomai Denpa High.
“Good evening, Hinooka-san.”
Homura felt relived at seeing some familiar faces.
“Good evening, you two. As for Touya-kun, he went out a little while ago.”
“Went out? At this hour? Why?”

Homura explained how Touya had gone to chase after Inari.
It was next to impossible for her to properly explain Inari's extremely willful actions while hiding the complicated circumstances within their club without making Inari seem like she had a completely bankrupt personality, so Himekawa and Otomaru weren't able to fully grasp it.
"Why are you two walking together? Club business?"
"No, we merely happened to run into each other just now."
"We were bored since we can't attend the club president meeting."
"There are no workshops at this hour either. But still, it's a bit strange. It's like I was just suddenly thrown out," said Himekawa.
"Yeah, same for me. I was left behind with Iguchi-san by everyone else. All the senpai seem to have gone to the baths, though."
"Iguchi-san too?"
"Yeah."
Iguchi was a first year at Kanazawa Asano High and a female member in the same club as Otomaru. The same thing apparently happened to Otomaru as Himekawa. Homura sighed and grumbled out loud.
"The circumstances are a bit different, but I'm also alone after the others left in ones and twos. Suddenly, there was no one else besides me… It's kinda lonely…"
"I heard that they're selling flat lemon ice cream at a stand at the café area, so why don't you come join me, Hinooka-san? Otomaru-kun too."
Homura nodded without hesitation. Otomaru also had no reason to decline.
As they walked, Himekawa timidly questioned Homura.
"By the way, Hinooka-san, where's Ame-chan?"
"Ame-chan? She had to attend the club president meeting for some reason and went to join up with Mori-chan. That's why I'm alone now."
"Is that so? What a shame… Truly a shame…"
Seeming to resolve herself over something, Himekawa turned to face Homura again.
"Hinooka-san, would you mind if I came over to the Seiran High girls' room tonight?"
"Oh? You mean you want to stay the night with us?"
Otomaru spoke up to answer Homura's question.
"Well, it's not that unusual, since all the rooms are divided between boys and girls. I'm also freeloading at the Tomakomai Denpa room. Though, it seems a bit redundant to worry about separating by gender here when we already sleep together in a huddle on Nutella. Ah, but aren't you staying at the room for my club's girls?"
"I've already talked it over with the Kanazawa Asano club president Shiragiku. Since this is a rare chance to interact with other clubs, I'll be staying at a different school's female room each night. We're keeping it a secret from the teachers, though."

“Ah… So that’s your plan to capture female friends, Himekawa-san!? Of course you can come over to our room, no problem. We have plenty of extra bed mats.”
“Thank you very much, Hinooka-san. I’m still in the middle of executing the plan. Please inform president Misasagi about it as well.”
“Yeah, got it.” Homura happily nodded, having regained her cheerfulness from earlier.
“Heeh, that sounds like fun,” remarked Otomaru.
“Otomaru-kun, if you get fed up with the boys from my Tomakomai Denpa club, feel free to escape to some other school’s room.”
“No, it’s fine. It’s plenty of fun as it is… Anyway, do you really have to be so harsh towards your male senpai all the time?”
“Is there anything wrong with that?”
“You know they talk about you like some kind of demon god who causes red snow to fall when you get angry, right? They told me a lot of stories—like how one time when your folded underwear was just five milimeters out of place, all meat disappeared from their stew, leaving something like a bowl of dissolved colors in water—and how you discovered a film roll that was unaccounted for in your photo records and proceeded to lock them out of the camp during a blizzard at night until they honestly confessed what pictures it contained.”
“All of those stories are true, though.”
“I see…”
Not wanting to be beaten, Otomaru also recounted his own miserable tales of hardship in his club.
After conversing with each other for a while, the three of them grew worried at how late Touya and Inari were in returning. Eventually, they decided to put off the visit to the café area and headed to the lodging house’s entrance hall to see if they had arrived yet.
At that point, a voice called out to them from the landing stairs above them.
“Hey, wait! Yeah, you guys down there!”
A tomboyish female upperclassman came sliding down the handrail on her skirt.
“There you are, Himekawa. And you other first years too.”
“—Haah.”
The one who had called them to a stop was a second year female member from Nagumo High, Nanakubo. It was easy to recognize her thanks to her color frame glasses and multi-purpose headphones.
“…Nanakubo-senpai?”
Homura reflexively called out her name, but Nanakubo glared at her in return.
Ugh… Scary…
“I’m not your senpai, ya know? Anyway, you’re all to come gather together at *Ufara Beach*. Don’t tell the teachers. There’ll be hell to pay if ya do. The gathering’s at 18:45. Equip for BP. And don’t be late.”

“Eh, why all of a sudden?”
“Shut up. Just be quiet and come. Otomaru, tell Iguchi too. Kuwazono… I met just before, so… Hinooka, you’re in charge of Touya. And tell that idiot Saho too, I can’t find him at all. Is he in the boys’ room?”
Though confused by Nanakubo’s fast-paced and impatient talking, Homura managed to stiffly nod. Ufara Beach was the name of a small beach not far away from the lodging house. But there was just one thing she didn’t understand.
“What does ‘Equip for BP’ mean?”
“Haah? Go ask Inari. I’m too busy right now. Geez, I hate pulling the short straw…”
“Umm, Touya-kun and Inari-senpai are…!”
However, before Homura could inform her of their absence, Nanakubo swiftly left and went off somewhere else.
At first Homura stiffened as she was about to reflexively chase after her, but then she stopped and slumped in resignation.
“Eh~, w-what was that all about~? I don’t get it at all~”
“BP probably stands for beach play, I think.”
“Beach play… then, ‘equip for BP’ means to change into swimsuits?”
“Probably.”
Himekawa tilted her head uncertainly, not fully grasping the situation either.
“This late at night? But isn’t there already a workshop for going to a lagoon by boat tomorrow?”
“Hmm… Nanakubo-senpai is quite a strange person.”
“You’re one to talk, Himekawa,” Otomaru murmured with a wry smile, before turning serious again. “I find it hard to deal with those Nagumo High guys. They have a kinda of strained atmosphere about them, you know?”
“Yeah, me too…” agreed Homura.
During the question-and-answer session, they hadn’t left a good impression on Homura either. That “hard to deal with” impression seemed to be gradually turning into “scary” as well.
“Is that so?” Himekawa candidly asked. “But Nanakubo-senpai remembered all our names, didn’t she?”
Homura couldn’t help but wonder in admiration whether Himekawa had nerves of steel or was simply thick-headed.
“I guess we have no choice but to follow her orders… But the fact that only the first years are being secretly called there gives me a really bad feeling…”
Faced with such an ominous order, Homura was filled with anxiety. To think that the trip to the beach she’d been looking forward to so much would happen under such concerning circumstances…
Despite their worries, the three of them decided to resume heading to the entrance for now.

It was at that moment that, with truly perfect timing, the two people they'd been looking forward returned to the lodging house.
"Inari-senpai! —Touya-kun!?"
Shocked by Inari and Touya's ghastly appearance, Homura completely forgot about Nanakubo's message. She ran over to the two of them.
"W-What happened to you two!?"
"Hmph! Nothing at all!!"
Inari passed by Homura and entered the lodging while dripping muddy water in her wake. There were fern branches and even *vines* from pea plants entwined in her hair.
Touya followed next. Behind him were two security guards belonging to the UNPIEP Japanese Branch who'd been out on patrol outside the lodging house, as well as a suspicious-looking man wearing a (torn-up) camouflage-type camera jacket.
The last man was also drenched in mud from head to toe and was being dragged along by the security guards on either side of him.
"You'll be paying—for the laundry charges!"
Unable to contain her anger, Inari turned around and retraced her steps with a dash, and then delivered a flying kick to the man's back.
A pathetic croak-like groan escaped from the man's lungs.
"You damn disgrace of a journalist!"
"S-Senpai, Seiran High is assigned to room 214! Here's the room key…!"
After returning to the entrance, Inari swiped the offered key card from Homura and walked off with loud, angry footsteps.
"Just what on Earth happened…?"
Still, Inari didn't seem to have any injuries. In fact, she appeared to have an excess of energy, even.
After watching the suspicious man being carried away, Touya walked over towards the shocked Homura and the others.
"Sorry for being late, Hinooka. Man, am I hungry right now."
"Sorry for eating before you guys came back… But seriously, what happened?"
Homura peered at Touya's mud-covered face, to which he smiled bitterly as he took off his dirtied glasses.
"Well, we ran into the so-called paparazzi, a cameraman who was taking clandestine photos to get a scoop."
"Eh!?"
"We accidentally caught sight of him as he was hiding in the forest and trying to escape—"
Touya recounted what happened—
Touya, who had ran to catch up to Inari on the forest path, had gotten into an argument with her in the middle of the forest.
After they had continued walking while arguing with each other for a while, Inari had noticed a sound among the trees and bushes not far off the path.
Inari was certain that it wasn't the sound of a wild animal's footsteps.

Since it was sure to be dangerous either way, Touya had used his terminal to call the security guards to let them handle it. However, Inari had plunged into the thicket by herself before they arrived.
With no other choice, Touya had followed after her.
It turned out that the source of the noise was an unauthorized trespasser, who seemed unexperienced with the jungle as he awkwardly tried to run away, and Touya and Inari had ended up chasing him deep into the forest, and when they finally caught him, they ended up tumbling down a muddy slope together.
“So you captured him…? By yourselves?”
“Amazing! You deserve a medal for this, Touya,” said Otomaru excitedly.
“No, no, no, that was extremely rash, you know!? How could you be so reckless!? Are you okay…? You don’t have any injuries?”
Homura tried to wipe away the mud on Touya’s face with a handkerchief, but Touya annoyingly swatted her hand away as he scowled in frustration.
“No, it’s no good. We were already too late.”
“Too late…?”
Homura was confused, unable to grasp the meaning of Touya’s words.
“…Ah, Touya-kun’s right.”
Upon hearing the phrase ‘clandestine photos’, Himekawa had immediately taken out her terminal and operated it to check something out, and now she murmured in a dispassionate tone.
“Leaked information has already started to spread through the Exploration Club watcher blogs. There’s been a huge explosion of hits on the keyword ‘Nutellan’. At this rate, top news organizations will soon be reporting on it too.”
Himekawa held out her terminal screen, which displayed an online search results list of news titles that were rapidly increasing in real time.
Homura was shocked.
Otomaru covered his face with his hand as he stared at the heavens.
However, he immediately recovered and looked back towards Himekawa.
“—In other words, they beat us to the punch before the official UN announcement could be released. But even so, that’s not such a huge problem, right? The UNPIEP headquarters will probably announce the proper information immediately after learning of this—”
“Was text information the only thing that was leaked out? …What about videos and pictures?”
Himekawa’s tone was a bit more serious compared to Otomaru’s.
Touya merely shook his head.
“I don’t know that much. Right now, buyers might still be negotiating prices over it with the illegal news site that ignored the journalist news pact to leak this. Either way, it’s out of our hands now.”
Homura grasped her head in both hands as her mind failed to grasp the magnitude of what was happening.

“Ah, right. Now might not be the best time, but we’ve been summoned… Ugh, there’s not much time left, you know?”
“Summoned?”
Homura hurriedly explained things to Touya. Upon hearing about the mysterious call to gather to first years by Nanakubo, Touya unexpectedly said “Seems interesting” with a smile.
“But I’ll leave that to you, Hinooka.”
“Eh?”
“Remember? I have to go attend the club president meeting. Ah, crap, it’s starting soon. Now’s not the time to be waiting for my clothes to dry here.”
At that, Otomaru and Himekawa nodded in understanding.
Only Homura stood there surprised.
“Hinooka… did you forget to properly listen again earlier? At the meeting, the usual rule is for each school’s club president, vice president and advisor to attend. Our club’s vice president is still undecided, but I’ll be filling in for the role today… We decided that, remember?”
“Was there a conversation like that? …Umm… but…”
“I have no idea what the whole summons is about, but it’s not like they’re going to eat you, you know? Have Ameno go with you.”
“But, but, Ame-chan also said that she has to attend the meeting. She was enthusiastically rambling something about ‘I’m the representative of the Honba Research Laboratory’s Nutellan probe units!’ today.”
“Ah, right.” Touya nodded as he recalled. Homura’s frown deepened even further.
“Umm~, it’s a bit discouraging having to go alone, you know~?”
“No problem, Hinooka-san. I’ve also resolved myself to go. Let’s go receive the hazing of our sports-minded hierarchical structured society together,” reassured Himekawa.
“Eeh?”
“I’ll be there too. That reminds me, I have to go call Iguchi soon or I’ll be in trouble—Anyway, good luck at the club president meeting, Touya!” declared Otomaru.
“Yeah. Tell us what happened at the meeting later.”
Himekawa and Otomaru each left to join up with the other first year members in their respective clubs.
Homura and Touya were the only ones left.
“…They left.”
Touya tried to comfortingly place a hand on Homura’s shoulder, but she swiftly dodged out of the way. Even if he had dried by now, his hand was still covered in mud.
“Don’t worry, you won’t be alone,” said Touya, seeming happy.
“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“Just bring along a certain second year student who still looks like a first year.”
Chapter 6 END

OSAKA OREFECTURAL
SCHOOL NAGUMO HIGH
THIRD YEAR STUDENT

OOZORE MISAKI

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) Metal-air battery: a specialized battery that functions through a chemical reaction between an internal pure metal anode and an external cathode that draws in ambient air from the surrounding environment, allowing it to last much longer than a normal battery.

Chapter 7

That night, along the path to the beach.
Homura and Inari were walking together down the sandy path to Ufara Beach.
Obeying Nanakubo's warning, they had surreptitiously left the inn so as not to be discovered by the teachers, but there was no need to worry in that regard anyway since the club president meeting had already begun.
On the other hand, the fact that the summons had obviously been planned for when the teachers would be absent made Homura all the more uneasy.
Inari, wearing a two-piece swimsuit that snugly fit her body, muttered in complaint.
"What 'Young mistress, I've brought you a change of clothes'!? This is a freaking swimsuit. And it's a perfect fit, even!"
"Does it suit your tastes, young mistress?" asked Homura in a reverent tone.
"Just where did you get this anyway…?"
"It was quite the challenge."
Just before Inari went off to take a shower in the bathroom adjoining the Seiran High room, she'd asked Homura to put her mud-covered uniform in the wash and prepare her a change of clothes.
The yukatas that had been prepared in the room were all for adults, too big even for Homura, let alone Inari. She could have borrowed one of Ameno's jerseys, but they were a bit small and, most importantly, didn't fit in with Homura's plan, so she'd conveniently forgotten about them.
At that point, she'd had a flash of intuition and gone to see Saho Akiho.
After managing to catch up to him just as he was about to leave the lodging house, Homura made a request of him.
"You want to borrow a swimsuit? Sure, but why? …You're not going wear it yourself, Hinooka-san?"
That was how Saho carelessly agreed to her request.
The matter of why exactly Saho had female swimsuits on hand was quite a serious issue, but Homura let the matter slide this time—including the question of why he had one in every size. In any case, the swimsuit he'd given her was a perfect fit for Inari. Most likely, he had prepared a swimsuit of this size for Kamikoma-senpai and Kanae Yuri.
Homura had also changed into her own swimsuit with a parka on top.
Presently, Inari continued to express her dissatisfaction.
"As if my help with the presentation wasn't enough, now you're making me tag along for this kind of diversion."

“Now, now, don’t say that, senpai. You came all this way, so there’s no going back now. When you have bitter melons, you might as well make Chanpuru[1].”
After Homura had changed into her swimsuit, she’d begged Inari to accompany her to Nanakubo’s gathering. Inari had just looked at Homura silently, and then switched her sandals for beach shoes and put on a cap even though it was night.
Then, with a long sigh, Inari had changed into a swimsuit with a sweater on top like Homura.
“Was there a gathering like this last year?”
“There was.”
“I see… Just what kind of surprise is waiting there…? Himekawa-san said it might be something like hazing, but…”
“…I can’t tell you anything now. You’ll understand right away once you get there.”
“Hey, do you not get along with Nanakubo-senpai or something?”
“You’re so noisy. Like I said, you’ll understand once you get there.”
After they walked through the forest along the coast for a while, the trees gradually cleared away and the sound of waves grew louder.
There was a faint figure standing further down the path ahead of them.
Considering the ruckus with the trespasser just before, Homura instinctively tensed, but the person’s identity soon became clear.
The flashlight in Inari’s hand illuminated their face.
“Well, if it isn’t Hayashi-kun.”
Ahead of them and walking in the same direction were Hayashi and Kanae Yuri from Hiyoshizaka High.
Their destination was clearly the same.
However, one thing that seemed out of place was the fact that Hayashi was a second year student. Homura wasn’t one to talk since she was bringing along Inari, but the gathering should have been for first years only…
“So Inari-san came too? Now that I think of it, you do fit the qualifications.”
“I’m not doing it.”
“Heeh. Is that really all right? Isn’t that risky?”
“Keep your mouth shut. If you talk too much, you’ll cause trouble for Nana.”
“Ah, right.”
This should have been the first time in a while that the two second years had spoken to each other, but they were talking as if not a day had gone by since they last met.
Since Inari had participated in Exploration Club activities with Seiran’s paired school Hiyoshizaka before she stopped attending the club, it wasn’t all that strange.
However, Kanae seemed disinterested as she watched the two of them talk.
Realizing this was her first opportunity to talk to Kanae since the start of the SA, Homura approached Kanae out of a desire to make a point of contact with her.

“Kanae-san. I’m Hinooka Homura, from Seiran High.”
Kanae glanced at her.
“I know.”
“R-Right. Of course you do. Yeah.”
Homura faltered, recalling the sharp glare she’d received before the start of today’s conference.
“Were you also called here by Nanakubo-senpai, Kanae-san? My nerves are on edge since I have no idea what’s going on… How about you?”
“I don’t want to go, obviously. But it can’t be helped…”
“Eh… It can’t be helped?”
“……”
Kanae said nothing further as she sank into silence.
Those words she’d muttered just now didn’t seem to fit this situation.
But since Kanae had come in her swimsuit anyway, Homura guessed that there must be some compelling reason for why she still chose to participate.
As Homura thought that, Hayashi called out from behind her.
“Hinooka-san, Hinooka-san. Just as she looks, Yuri is bad at communicating with others, so you should treat her less reservedly, you know?”
Hayashi offered that irresponsible piece of advice.
“H-Hayashi-senpai, please clear up the misunderstanding from this morning,” begged Homura in tears.
“Ah, sorry, sorry. The culprit was me.”
His apology was careless as well.
“Another one of your stupid pranks? You really are the enemy of women,” said Inari in exasperation.
“Hey, hey, I don’t recall ever having been called that, you know? Don’t fill my junior with weird misconceptions.”
“Hah!”
Inari and Hayashi’s exchange continued, but Kanae, the victim in question, maintained her indifferent air.
Suddenly, Kanae turned to Homura and spoke up.
“—Where’s Ameno?”
“Eh… Ame-chan? She’s—”
Just as she’d told Himekawa, Homura explained how Ameno wouldn’t be coming since she was attending the club president meeting.
“I see.”
After saying only that, Kanae nodded and regained her indifferent air. But she murmured a single incomprehensible comment at the end.
“Can’t be helped, I guess. In the first place, we don’t have the necessary equipment for her.”
“……Equipment?”
Soon after that, they arrived at Ufara Beach.
There were lights glowing here and there as landmarks, and they could already hear a voice explaining something loudly from a distance.
Homura and the others appeared to be the last group to arrive.

“You’re late! I said to make sure to be on time!”
Nanakubo flared up at them with a fierce threatening look, but suddenly faltered.
“…Idiot… You actually came, Hayashi…!?”
Nanakubo glared at Hayashi. Then, she saw the small figure beside him, and the edges of her lips twisted in frank displeasure.
Nanakubo seemed like she wanted to say something, but Inari beat her to it and spoke in a calm tone.
“Nana, I only came here to escort Hinooka.”
“……That so?”
First years from every school were gathered all around them.
Nagashino was here. Saho was here. Himekawa and Otomaru were also here with their fellow club members.
There were about thirty of them in all. Homura worried that having this many people absent from the lodging house would arouse suspicion, but…
“…Hey, Homura, where’s four-eyes? You know, Touya?”
Inari, who’d also been surveying the group of first years, questioned Homura.
“Touya-kun and Ameno-chan aren’t here. Everyone keeps asking the same thing… I guess I really do look that unreliable by myself… Anyway, they can’t come since they’re attending the club president meeting.”
“What? Say that sooner. Even if the golem can’t participate in the first place —Guh!”
“Aah!”
A flashlight illuminated Inari and Homura’s faces in turn.
Nanakubo seemed to be confirming who was present and absent for a second time as she checked the list of names in her hand.
Nanakubo was also wearing a swimsuit herself. A pair of binoculars hung from her neck, and a huge tote bag was slung over her shoulder. However, this time she didn’t have her trademark headphones.
Homura had overlooked them in the dim lighting, but there were two second years from Nagumo High, Ikeba and Kadoshimo, standing next to Nanakubo.
“There’s no time. I’ll explain it as briefly as possible.”
When Nanakubo took out something from her bag and casually held it up above her for everyone to see, Homura and all the first years reflexively gasped.
The item was a single ring that released a pale phosphorescent light over the nighttime beach.
A Transport Ring—! Why?
Everyone’s eyes were drawn to the unmistakable glitter of that ring. It was the most important Exploration Club item, which students were forbidden to carry with them outside of official club premises and should have been strictly overseen by every school.

“I don’t even need to explain what this is, right? This is a Transport Ring. This ring was *treated as lost and irrecoverable* almost ten years ago. During the remaining hour until the scheduled end of the club president meeting, we’ll be sending you first years to Nutella.”
As expected, the first years were unable to hold back their shock at hearing this and clamoured noisily.
When Homura turned around to look, Hayashi was grinning and Inari was glaring at Nanakubo with her arms folded dauntingly.
Nanakubo checked the current time.
“It should be about daybreak on Nutella right now.”
The two other second years went around the group of first years and handed a set of items out to each of them.
Each set included a lifejacket, a bottle of mineral water (with a handle strap to fasten it to the body), and a waist pouch containing a notepad, writing implements and a first-aid kit.
“B-But, Nana-senpai, we can’t go unless we confirm the weather on Nutella…!”
Nagashino spoke up with a bewildered voice.
As a member of the same club as Nanakubo, just how much of this situation had she foreseen beforehand?
Even the uninformed Homura understood that this was an extremely abnormal situation.
However, Nanakubo rejected her junior’s words.
“I won’t accept any questions—However, you can decline and withdraw if you want.”
Nanakubo showed a challenging smile.
“Get it? This is a race between every school club. The detailed rules will be explained over there. Every school can send exactly two members. Hurry up and decide.”
All the first years exchanged looks with each other.
Clubs with more than two members were forced to select which two members to send, in other words.
On the other hand, being the only first year present from Seiran High, Homura didn’t fulfill the two member quota. At this rate, she would end up being directly turned away from participating before she could even stand at the start line.
“Of course, I’ll be coming too, as the referee. We’ve saved up all the magical energy needed to perform the transport, so don’t worry about that part.”
“Umm!”
Homura’s nervous voice resounded more loudly throughout the beach than she’d expected.
“Is there… a prize? Since it’s… a race and all…”
Immediately after she said that, Homura recalled the warning that no question would be accepted.
However, there was no help for it since she had already spoken.

But perhaps because she'd planned to explain that part from the start, Nanakubo just smirked.
"Don't be greedy. There's not really a prize. Not a physical one, anyway. However—"
Nanakubo paused suggestively.
"—The club that comes in first in this race is *allowed to make one request at the club president meeting with no restrictions*. The other club presidents won't oppose it no matter what it is. That's the agreement between all of the club presidents."
"O-One request with no restrictions…?"
Homura suddenly felt dizzy.
She hadn't heard anything about a secret Exploration Club custom like this from Misasagi-senpai. And it seemed to be the same for the first years from other schools based on their agitated reactions.
"Each school has five minutes to choose their members and prepare themselves! After that, we depart! We'll be collecting all of your terminals here!"
The atmosphere among the new members of every school had already turned hectic and tense as they listened to Nanakubo's announcement.
Homura turned to Inari.
"We'll be in big trouble if the teachers find out about it! …That's what Touya-kun would say if he were here, anyway."
"They won't find out, so it's fine," Inari calmly replied.
"Eh, that's the issue here?" Homura weakly sank down to the sandy ground.
"…Whether it's Fujimori-sensei or this super dangerous-sounding race, why is the Exploration Club so determined to surprise me…? I mean, they even prepared a Transport Ring…"
"……"
As Inari merely looked at Homura with her arms crossed as if it had nothing to do with her, Nanakubo came over to them.
The two second years from different schools glared at each other.
"…Inari, what are you going to do?" asked Nanakubo. Her tone seemed to be itching for a fight.
Inari remained silent and merely looked at Nanakubo with an easygoing smile.
"…You really just going to head back the lodging house?" Nanakubo continued.
"Aren't you the one who was shouting 'Stop, stop, I want to run away' during the race last year, Nana?"
"…That irritating attitude of yours hasn't changed, I see."
Nanakubo was clearly vexed by Inari's impudent backtalk.
She then looked away from Inari and turned her gaze towards Homura who was kneeling on the sand.
"Hinooka—hey, are you planning to participate in the race or not?"
"Ugh… I-I don't know…"

“Drag in this brat Inari.”
“—Eh?”
As Homura almost reflexively said ‘Drag her in the sand? Like an antlion pit?’, Nanakubo irritably pointed at Inari with her thumb.
“This girl was one of the members who stayed behind last year. She didn’t participate last time, so she can participate in this year’s race even if she’s a second year. It’s not unusual for clubs to lack new members. It’s merely tradition to turn over the chance to participate to first years. See, it’s much more advantageous for second years who are more experienced with Nutella to participate, though the convalescent and unsteady Inari would be more like a handicap for your team.
“What was that!?” Inari snapped at Nanakubo.
There was a stark difference of drive and vigour between her and the clearly dubious Homura.
“Umm, I think the bigger problem is the issue of my resolve to participate, you know~…?”
“—I order you to participate as your senpai. Got it?”
With a final cold glance at Homura, Nanakubo then left without waiting for her reply.
“Hmph. She’s gotten awfully full of herself since I last saw her.”
Despite her words of ridicule, Inari clearly admired Nanakubo.
“Inari……senpai?”
“Hah? The answer’s no.”
“…Why were we given these jackets? Are we going to be sent to a really dangerous place?”
“Don’t know.”
“I see.”
Homura could say nothing in the face of Inari’s usual curt rejection.
Though, since she hadn’t participated last year, she probably really didn’t know where the race would take place.
“…Can’t you just pretend to participate…? If I come back in defeat all alone, I won’t be able to face Misasagi-senpai and Touya will get angry at me, you know?”
“There’s no point in pretending. If you’re going to do it, fight to win.”
Eh!?
“N-No way. Winning’s impossible for me. I’m the weakest member in our school’s Exploration Club…”
Homura couldn’t quite find the right timing to stand up from her kneeling position on the sand. At that moment, a first year boy came over and peered down at her timid face.
“There you are, Hinooka-san. You’re not participating either, right? Since we have the opportunity, how about we both go on a nighttime walk along the beach?”
“Eh… Akiho-kun?”
Homura titled her head in confusion at his sudden suggestion.

“Ah, Inari-senpai, that swimsuit really looks good on you! It’s perfect! Is it comfortable?”
“Comfortable? I guess.”
Akiho made a high spirited fist pump.
Behind them, Homura finally found the chance to stand up. After wiping the sand off her legs while listening to Saho’s attempt to invite Inari on a nighttime walk too, Homura suddenly grabbed him by the scruff of his jacket and forced him to turn around to face her.
“Wah!”
“Hey, Saho Akiho-kun? Aren’t you participating as a pair with Kanae-san? Since you’re the only two first years in Hiyoshizaka’s club?”
“Ah, that? Well, Yuri-chan seems to be strangely motivated for once, but I don’t have any interest in aquatic wildlife. It’d obviously be more fun to spend time with you, Hinooka-san. That’s why I let senpai participate in my stead.”
“Senpai?”
Inari turned a fierce stare towards a certain pair further off behind Saho. As Nanakubo was waving her flashlight and calling for everyone to gather, Kanae Yuri was walking towards her, and with her was a second year who was accompanying her as if nothing was wrong. Homura was surprised to see him next to Kanae, but Inari was even more speechless.
“…Haya…shi…? He wouldn’t be so childish… No… I see, so that’s how it is… that damn little…”
“Umm, senpai? …Young mistress Sunao?”
Homura peered at Inari’s expression even as she felt the atmosphere of unrest that was developing around the second year.
“Sorry, Homura, but I’ve changed my mind.”
“You mean you’ll pretend to participate?”
“We can’t lose to those two, Homura.”
“Umm, I feel like our views are subtly off here? Will my life and safety be all right?”
With their positions now reversed, Homura was now being completely dragged along by Inari. Saho lightly offered her some obligatory encouragement.
“Heh, so you’re participating, Hinooka-san? How reckless,” he said with wide eyes. “Guess we’ll leave the walk for another time. What a shame. Since we’re technically part of opposing teams, I can’t support you, but be careful, all right? By the way, Yuri-chan wasn’t in a good mood today so you should watch out for her.”
“Yes… thank you for the warning… Give my regards to everyone else staying behind…”
Homura waved goodbye with dead eyes containing zero fighting spirit.
Chapter 7 END

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) Chanpuru: an Okinawa stir-fry dish, widely considered the staple dish of Okinawan cuisine.

Chapter 8

The excitement of an unexpected transport—
This was the first time since picking up Suzuran that Homura would be visiting Nutella.
To think that her next trip would suddenly occur with no time for her to prepare her heart.
This also was her first time transporting with so many other people and without the Exploration Club clothing that purposefully resembled school uniforms, which she'd been told was because self-image was important when going to Nutella.
Every club prepared two participants, and no clubs withdrew from the race.
There were twenty-six participants in total, though their degree of eagerness to participate varied.
Nanakubo would be accompanying them along with the two other second years working as her assistants, making for a total of twenty-nine people.
What would the sight of twenty-nine people holding hands in a huge circle and suddenly vanishing from the Iriomote Island beach look like to bystanders?
Unfortunately, as one of the participants, Homura didn't get the chance to witness it herself.
"…Hyaa…"
Homura was surprised at the sudden sensation of her shoes being submerged in water.
She was relieved when she saw that her feet were standing on sandy ground.
The location on Nutella that corresponded to the Iriomote Island's coast was also along a coast.
It was a circular sandy beach of a hundred meters in diameter, surrounded by high and steep cliffs. The bright horizon could be glimpsed through a tunnel-shaped hole in side of the cliffs that connected to the ocean.
Homura and the others had appeared on the edge of the beach near the tunnel's entrance.
It was a mystical place where the only sound present was the gentle sound of the waves along the beach. Far behind them was a slope that led up to solid ground.
There was no sign of man-made structures like ruins or a camp on this naturally pristine beach.
The next thing Homura noticed after the sensation of water at her feet was the change in temperature after having transported from night to day. But even then, this place was still quite cool thanks to the cliffs blocking the sunlight.

“We really did come to Nutella…”
When Homura looked up at the sky, the familiar Bagel was there to greet the novice investigators, telling them that this was certainly not Earth.
The Bagel here looked thinner and farther away compared to the white gentle arc that Homura had seen at the Seiran High base camp.
“I see… It’s because we’re at a lower latitude here…”
She heard splashing behind her.
“—Homura, Homura. Everyone’s gathering together.”
Homura was snapped out of absentmindedly looking at the sky by Inari’s voice from behind her.
“Ah, yeah, roger… Wait, what!? Uwaah!?”
“What’s with that reaction?”
Homura was shocked and reflexively took a step back after turning to look at Inari.
The height and voice were definitely those of Inari-senpai, but her appearance had changed drastically.
“Are those… ears…? Are they real?”
“These? Yeah, they’re real.”
—To sum it up, Inari had transformed.
Homura slowly held out a hand to grab one of the twitching ears on Inari’s head.
She felt moist yet warm and comfortably fluffy fur in her hand.
Since coming to the SA, Homura had often heard others call those who tended to undergo striking physical transformations on Nutella as ‘Trans’.
There were apparently more specific subcategories like TAPC (Trans Animal Possessed Case) and TSPC (Trans Spirit Possessed Case) as well.
“Inari-senpai, do you have a tail too…?”
“I-I do… but give it a rest, okay…? It’s embarrassing to be stared at like that.”
Inari retreated while holding down her tail behind her. Homura was trying to circle around her to get a good look at it.
Her curiosity getting the better of her, Homura jumped at her, but Inari dodged with a side step so swift it was as if she had teleported.
Even so, her fluffy tail peeked out from behind her back.
“What’s with you…? H-Haven’t you already seen pictures of me on Nutella in the clubroom before?”
“No, this is my first time seeing it… Umm… can I touch it a little? I won’t do anything bad.”
“Stop it!”
Her big ears were like those of a fox, but her sharps eyes and the contours of her round face resembled a cat. She also had a lean physique that gave off a masculine impression.
If Homura was more knowledgeable, though, she probably would have likened Inari’s appearance to that of the fennec fox that lived in the African Sahara.

“Now’s not the time for that. Look.” Inari pointed past Homura with her chin.
All the other club members were climbing the rockface in the opposite direction facing the ocean at Nanakubo’s direction.
Realizing they were about to be left behind, Homura hurried to catch up to them with Inari.
“Any suffering from transport sickness? Just listen while resting your bodies, okay?”
After finishing a second roll call, Nanakubo began to explain the rules of the race.
They had transported to an isolated island in Nutella’s southern seas.
All the club members had gathered together on an area of elevated ground along a peninsula with a panorama of the ocean spreading across the horizon as far as the eye could see.
Nanakubo seemed to have lost some of her earlier impatience after transporting here.
“We call it a race, but it’s more like ‘orienteering’. It’s an adventure race to be precise. There should be some people here who’ve already done it during club training.”
It wasn’t an actual question, but two students from Hamamatsu Central energetically raised their hands. There were several raised hands from other schools as well. It appeared to be quite a major activity in the Exploration Club’s standard training menu.
“Good, good. What you’re doing tonight—though it’s morning here—is a smaller scale version of that.”
Orienteering was a sport born in Scandinavia that took place out in nature. It involved giving each competitor a map of the competition field and making them search for multiple checkpoints located throughout the field in a race to finish first.
Additionally, unlike the traditional version of orienteering which was an individual competition, an adventure race was a team competition. In an adventure race, the information on the provided map was sparse and sometimes even took place in unexplored regions, which was closer to the format of this irregular race.
“We’re on an uninhabited island right now. Well, obviously. Its total circumference is fifty-five kilometers. It’s smaller than Iriomote Island, but larger than Izu Ooshima in the Izu Archipelago. Just as you can see, the island has mountains and valleys. It also has fresh water rivers. There are even ponds here and there.”
Nanakubo pointed at a boulder where a rough and simple monument was erected. It had a Japanese flag attached that had maintained its form well even after being worn down by wind and rain.
“This island originally had a Transport Ring constructed on it to use it as a base for the ‘Public Planet Corporation’, the predecessor of the Japanese branch of the UNPIEP. However, as you can see, this is an isolated island in

the middle of the ocean. There are neither any large land animals nor any ruins to be found here, and going out into the ocean is too dangerous. In other words, they picked the wrong place for a base. The investigation of the island was finished almost immediately, and after that, the only plans left for it was to come again should Nutellan researchers request a second investigation or to use it as a training field for investigators."

Homura and other investigators these days were able to observe Nutella through satellite photos—though the image quality was quite grainy—in advance on Earth. The discovery of this island in the days when the observation technology hadn't yet advanced that far was quite an achievement.

Though the realization came a bit late, Homura couldn't help but feel relieved that they hadn't transported into the middle of the ocean and become floating carcasses.

"…However, it was right around then that the Transport Ring was *lost*. This incident caused quite a disturbance behind the scenes among the higher-ups. After all, geographically speaking, Iriomote Island is basically our national border with our *dear neighbor*[1]. Well, none of that matters now. It's all in the past. You can ask your teachers about it when you get back. In any case, the lost Transport Ring was safely recovered by some of our senpai back then… and they shrewdly took the opportunity to keep hold of it for themselves."

"Oohs" of admiration rang out among the novice investigators as Nanakubo finished explaining the story. Of course, there were anxious voices that said "Isn't that bad?" as well. Even to Homura, who didn't know a thing about politics, the tale sounded incredibly risky and suspicious.

"This Transport Ring, which is recorded as a lost item, has been passed down to each successive Exploration Club representative in secret. I'm temporarily borrowing it from representative Tenryuu right now. And since it's only ever used once a year during the SA, it's full to the brim with magical energy too."

Eeh, isn't that cheating…?

That was some shocking news to Homura, who had fretted over the scant remaining energy left in the Transport Ring when rescuing Misasagi-senpai.

"Anyway, back to explaining the race. Basically, this island is a garden for us Exploration Club members. However, it's also a pristine island that hasn't been visited in approximately six years in Nutellan time. There are no real trails here. No matter how much your physical abilities have increased on Nutella, don't let your mind wander and relax or you'll pay for it."

Nanakubo seemed to be directing that warning at herself as well and firmly put the Transport Ring on her finger.

"Now then. We already transported to this island once earlier this morning and finished setting up the checkpoints. Here."

As she explained, Nanakubo took out a sample of the checkpoints from her bag.

It was a thirty-centimeter-sized triangular prism made of cloth, and it was painted in red and white, colors that stood out in a natural environment like this.
“You’ll wander the island in search of these. Both the start and goal are here, besides that, you’re free to choose whatever route you wish. We’ll give you all maps before you begin. There are also several aspects that are different from a usual orienteering race, so listen well. First, the checkpoints each count for a different number of points. The winning team will be decided by how many points you’ve accumulated in six hours. If there are multiple teams tied for first place, the ones who arrived at the goal first win. —Well? Have you gotten the gist of it?”
One of the first years raised a hand.
“Can we use magic?”
“Use whatever you want. If you guys can effectively use magic in this race at your levels, then that’s great. You can even start a battle royale with each other if you want. However! Second years are forbidden from using magic! And you can’t use familiars either.”
“Ye~s,” replied Hayashi in a shrewd-sounding tone.
Next to Homura, Inari merely stared at Nanakubo with her arms crossed.
“Will the race still continue if it rains?”
Nagashino was the one to ask that question.
The sky was completely clear, so it was an unexpected question to everyone else, but Nanakubo wore a disappointed yet also oddly proud expression—as if she had anticipated that kind of question.
“Hihihi,” snickered Nanakubo. “True. Let alone rain, even squalls are quite possible on this island. And very violent ones at that. If rain falls on this goal site, then we’ll stop the race then. But it’s common for isolated drizzles to come down in the mountains. You have to deal with it on your own in that case. You can keep track of which direction you’re going in by—” She pointed at the sky above. “—looking at the Bagel. If it rains or turns cloudy, you’ll have to rely on your compasses instead.”
Compass? That was the tool that had greatly aided Homura and Touya when chasing the tracks of the wolves on Nutella. But, if Nagashino hadn’t asked the question just now, what would have happened if they encountered a squall during the race…? It seemed liked the race overseers were still purposefully hiding some things from them, making Homura even more uneasy.
“…No other questions? Then let’s get started.”
“Ro~ger~,” everyone replied. It appeared that everyone had resolved themselves to some degree the moment each club was put into teams of two.
About half of the race participants were older and experienced members, but exploring the unknown wild was something that every Exploration Club member experienced after joining.
Nanakubo looked at her mechanical watch.

“All right, let’s begin the race! First, we’ll hand out maps, compasses and record cards! Ah, wait, don’t go running off yet! There’s ten minutes until the official start. All right? I’ll give the start signal in ten minutes!”
Nanakubo gave a short blow of the flute hanging from her neck as a demonstration.
The two second years serving as her assistants held up bundles of copied maps, causing every participant to instantly gather around them.
What, eh, it’s already starting!? In just ten minutes—?
After vacantly standing there for a moment, Homura finally followed everyone else’s lead and jostled in line to get her own map and compass.
“Inari-senpai! I got your share as well! …Umm, senpai?”
When Homura came back, Inari, who’d been standing upright while listening to Nanakubo’s explanation, was sitting on the grassy ground with her head drooped a bit.
Her previously perked ears were also slumped on her head now, making it easy to tell her current condition.
“Are you okay…? Could it be… you’re suffering from transport sickness?”
“No.” Inari shook her head even as it remained drooped. “I just… got sleepy from Nana’s long explanation…”
Inari childishly tried to act tough, but it appeared she’d been surreptitiously hit by transport sickness due to transporting for the first time in a while.
Though the symptoms were transient, it apparently hit some people quite strongly. Even Touya, who strove to avoid relying on others as much as possible, had resignedly borrowed Homura’s shoulder when he’d suffered from it before. Homura couldn’t help being impressed by Inari’s force of will that refused to realize her own condition.
Homura bent down while checking Inari’s condition.
“Umm… I’ve discovered a serious problem in this race…”
“…Problem?” Inari glared at Homura with a single eye.
“We’ve got water… but we have no food. We have no sustenance. We’re going to quickly get worn out at some point.”
“…Finding the calories you need is also part of the race. Just eat any bugs you find crawling around.”
“Bugs are a bit…”
Inari-senpai, are you seriously saying that?
“More importantly… Homura, what’re you going to do?”
“Haah… I have no confidence I can win, so can’t I skip the race and stroll around the beach idly? If it’s all right with you, of course… Ah, no good, huh? Your eyes are scary right now.”
“……”
Inari shifted to sit cross-legged and stared hard at Homura.
“…Right back at you. Are you all right that? Haven’t you managed to make a guess about what the race’s prize and the topic of discussion in the club president meeting is going to end up being?”
“Hmm—? What?”

“You really have no idea at all?”
In order to run away from Inari’s questioning, Homura desperately wracked her brains.
“…Mumumu. I painfully realized it during the SA, but our Seiran High club is nowhere near the level of the other schools…”
“That’s exactly why—”
Inari raised her voice, regardless of the fact that they were right near their other rivals.
“The other schools are obviously aiming to get the rights to talk and negotiate with the Nutellan as the prize. She’s called Subaru-hime, right? They’re clearly after her. I also told Touya, remember? You guys are too carefree. Don’t push everything on Mayo.”
“……”
Homura turned speechless.
“Eh… That might be kinda bad…”
Homura felt a cold sweat forming on her skin.
Homura had vaguely pictured a future where Seiran High and Hiyoshizaka High worked together to deepen relations with Subaru-hime. That’s how it should have been, but….
“When an exceedingly huge treasure like this is found, it doesn’t matter who the first discoverer was or how close to it your school is. Even if it’s technically outside the country, if people forcefully try to make contact with her and go too far, the whole area where Subaru-hime lives might get quarantined. Your personal sentiments don’t matter to everyone else. The fastest wins.”
“T-That’s… Misasagi-senpai and Touya-kun will surely resolve it somehow at the club president meeting…”
Inari’s expression had softened somewhat after her transport sickness seemed to have subsided a bit.
“…I see. That might also be part of the purpose of this test of courage here.”
“What purpose?”
“Basically, the club presidents entrust resolving issues that concern their respective interests to the first years who bear the future of the Exploration Club.”
“……Future?” Homura turned frantic at the word. “T-That’s too heavy a responsibility! W-What do I do!? What should I do?”
Inari put her hand over her mouth to stop herself from voicing the thought ‘You should have switched places with Touya to serve as the vice-president at the meeting’. After restraining the urge, she held out a hand to Homura.
“Show me the map… Homura, you go spy on what the other teams are planning.”
“Roger.”
After saluting and standing up, Homura turned to look over their surroundings.

The pairs from each school were scattered about and seemed to be deciding their plans for the race.
There were varied reactions whenever someone's eyes happened to meet Homura's; some would immediately look away and some would stare back, with equally variedly emotions in their expressions.
"……If I remember right…"
Himekawa from Tomakomai Denpa should have come to Nutella too… but Homura couldn't catch any sight of her.
Eventually, a first year boy who was the same animal-type Trans as Inari caught her attention. The boy began to tremble and became clearly fearful the moment Homura's curious gaze turned on him.
Appearance-wise, his transformation wasn't as striking as Inari's. Even so, the long and slender straight ears on his head really stood out.
"A rabbit? So cute!"
The rabbit boy hid behind a nearby female student.
The female student looked up from the map in her hands and turned in Homura's direction, and then she gave a small nod in greeting and walked over to her.
"—Things have turned quite serious, Hinooka. How about it, is your team ready for this?"
"…Ah!"
That low intoned tone and voice was very familiar.
"C-Could it be… Himekawa-san…!?"
The girl nodded.
Pale skin that seemed to freeze sunlight. Wavy pure white hair.
An abstract pattern that resembled undyed clothing was visible on her body beneath her swimsuit.
"…You look completely different from Elves like Misasagi-senpai."
"Yes… Apparently, I'm currently the only one of this type in Japan. There were signs of it early on after patterns appeared on my body, but… I only underwent a huge change in form recently. I still haven't gotten used to it —"
As she spoke, Himekawa pushed off the rabbit boy that was clinging to her waist in fear.
"Since I'm the only one in the country, I wanted to personally name this type as the 'Snow Elf'—but they already found precedents among male investigators in North America. They apparently call such unusual Trans types names like Wendigoes and Sasquatches over there."
"I've never heard of those odd names before…"
Himekawa shrugged.
"More eerie than odd. They're the names of fabled monsters like snow men and wind demons. My case is best described as a snow woman… but for the time being, I've been registered as a Wendigo."
"I think you look really cool!"

“…Really? Thank you very much. I’m happy to be told that by you, Hinooka-san. Inari’s transformation also looks wonderful. In comparison… this kid is…”
Himekawa pulled the parka of the bunny boy who hadn’t learned his lesson and clung to her arm next, and made him stand up properly.
“Uuuuh… Shizune-san… You really intend to do this?”
“This is Kuwazono Yuu from my club. He’s a Trans like me… As you can see, he has quite the courageous personality… He and I are the only two first years in Tomakomai Denpa’s club. That’s why…”
Himekawa’s words trailed off there. She was probably trying to say, “That’s why we have to participate together whether we like it or not.”
“Nice to meet you, Kuwazono-kun,” greeted Homura.
The boy frantically bowed his head in return, causing his ears to flop in front of his face.
“There’s not much time left before it starts.”
Cutting the introductions there, Himekawa lowered her voice and spoke in a serious tone.
“Hinooka-san. I think you’ve already probably guessed, but everyone’s goal in this race is to get hold of the new base camp that’s going to be established for Seiran High.”
“…Does the same go for you and Tomakomai Denpa?”
Himekawa gained a complex expression with clear mixed feelings.
“No, my club is different. We still have lots of observation work to go and can’t leave our base in the far north. Though, I admit I’m quite interested in that Nutellan princess myself.
“But regardless, I’ll be challenging this race with all our might.”
“Fueeeeee~. Why…?”
Unlike the eager Himekawa, Kuwazono trembled as he spoke tearfully.
“If we win, we’ll get to request a female dormitory with an attached shower room for our base camp.”
“……Yeah.”
“Ah, but I can’t discard the idea of requesting for our club to be given priority in receiving a Nutellan probe unit like Ameno-chan either.”
“Ahaha, that’s a great idea.”
Himekawa didn’t say it out loud, but essentially, her stated goals wouldn’t inconvenience Seiran High. However, it wouldn’t benefit Seiran High either, merely leaving the whole Nutellan matter at square one.
In any case, though, Homura was a bit uneasy about whether it was really a good idea to have Kuwazono accompany Himekawa in the race as her partner.
Despite that, Himekawa remained motivated, and she grasped Homura’s hand in a tight grip, snapping back Homura’s attention.
“That’s why we can’t cooperate with you, but I’ll still be rooting for you, Hinooka-san. Let’s have a fair race.”
“Yeah… Thanks, Himekawa-san.”

“So, Hinooka-san, do you have any plans to work together with your paired school Hiyoshizaka?”
“Ah, I forgot about that. I’ve got to go—Thanks again!”
Parting from the two Tomakomai Denpa members, Homura then searched for Hayashi-senpai and Kanae Yuri from Hiyoshizaka High.
The other teams were already starting to carefully look over their maps while surveying the island, writing down and arguing over routes to take, and making various other preparations—among that hustle and bustle, the two people Homura was searching for really stood out in a certain sense.
“Ah, there you are. Kanae-san… Mumu? She’s sleeping!? …Is it due to transport sickness?”
Kanae was lying sprawled on the ground.
Speaking of which, that young man Akiho had said something about Kanae before the transport.
For an instant, Hayashi looked like he was having Kanae lay her head on his stretched out legs as he sat next to her, but it turned out to be Homura’s eyes playing tricks on her. Still, they were positioned quite close to each other on the ground.
“Umm, Hayashi-senpai…? Is Kanae-san… okay?”
“Ah, Hinooka-san. Good luck with the race.”
“Why are you talking as if it has nothing to do with you?”
Hayashi-senpai was carefree as always.
“I think Hamamatsu Central and Ecchuu Takaoka High are seriously aiming to win this, their respective paired schools Mikawakotobuki High and Kanazawa Asano High as well if they team up. Isn’t this quite bad for us?”
Kanazawa Asano High was the school that Otomaru attended.
Homura’s heart felt pained at the thought of having to ruthlessly compete with a good natured guy like him.
However, the sharp question and request from his club president Shiragiku during the SA presentation had left a strong impression on her.
“True. And even discounting that, we have no reason to just let ourselves lose without doing anything…”
“Right, right.”
Fitting his easygoing nature, Hayashi hadn’t even turned to look over the map, despite the fact that there were only one or two minutes left until the race started.
Was that the composure of a second year, or something else…? But there was another matter that concerned Homura most.
“Hayashi-senpai, is it really okay to be so carefree, after you even went through trouble to exchange places with Akiho-kun despite the custom for first years to participate?”
“Hmm? Are you talking about her? Ah, you mean me? Well, I’ll manage somehow.”

Hayashi looked down at Kanae, who was lying curled up on Hayashi's wind-breaker spread out on the bit of grass growing on the rocky surface. A big hat was placed over her face in place of a parasol.
"…She went to sleep again…… Hmm?"
Kanae's skin tone was different than on Earth, having darkened slightly. For a moment, Homura wondered if she was the kind to quickly tan even under weak morning sunlight like this, but that wasn't the case.
It looked like she was a Trans too, but Homura wouldn't get the chance to properly look at her transformed appearance until much later.
"She's really weak during daytime. She always sleeps whenever she has the spare time."
"H-Heeh, even on Nutella? But now isn't the time for that—"
Homura couldn't quite get used to Hayashi's relaxed pace.
"Didn't Hiyoshizaka High contribute just as much as Seiran High in the encounter with the Nutellan—with Subaru? You guys feel the same as us in not wanting other clubs to butt in unnecessarily, right? At this rate, you won't be able to face Koma-senpai and Taga-senpai when you get back either…"
"Don't worry about it. It's just a festival race. Let's take it easy."
"Well, that might be the case for you, Hayashi-senpai, but… Ah, no, that's not what—!"
Homura desperately tried to discuss plans for the race with him, but then the sound of Nanakubo's flute signaled the end of the planning time. With no other choice, Homura ran back to Inari.
There, Inari was finally standing upright again.
"All right. Shall we get going?"
It appeared she'd completely recovered from the transport sickness.
She'd folded the map to make it easy to carry and also written down notes around the compass direction line and on the various routes.
"Don't tell me you memorized and installed the whole map into your brain!?"
"As if. Mayo's the only one who could do that. Analyzing the possible courses was the most I could do."
The participants gathered around Nanakubo once more.
"Listen well, because this is the last time I'll repeat this. The race lasts for six hours. Each team is free to choose any course they wish. You start from here. And the goal is here too. If both members of your team don't make it back here before the six hours is up, you're automatically disqualified."
Until, Nanakubo had clearly been grudgingly acting in her coordinating role, but now she had regained her unique sadistic composure as she gazed over the uneasy faces of the novice members.
"And there's one thing I forgot to mention. I'll be releasing a signal every hour! And again when there are thirty minutes left and fifteen minutes left as well. Make sure you carefully calculate the time it'll take for you to come back if you intend to keep searching right until the very end."

With the loud sound of the flute resounding through the air as the start signal, the race between every Exploration Club began.
“Allez! Allez! Allez[2].”
Immediately after the start, the two boys from Hamamatsu Central let loose a strange cheer and dashed off swiftly before everyone else, as expected.
Homura stopped as she was about to start running and nervously turned to Inari. Inari wasn’t standing still, but she was walking quite leisurely.
Meanwhile,
“No need to hurry, everyone. Just follow after them!” Hayashi shouted in a mischievous tone.
The two Hamamatsu Central boys turned around in surprise, but they didn’t stop running.
“Cut it out!”
“Don’t follow us!”
While tossing those shouts of protest behind them, the two boys took the lead over everyone else. They were already fervently consulting their map and had no time to check out the others behind them.
Hayashi-senpai followed after the two Hamamatsu Central members while calmly watching their backs.
He pulled along Kanae by grasping her hand, since she was wobbly on her feet and clearly still half-asleep.
Many of the other race participants looked at each other in confusion in the face of this sudden development, but there were also some teams that immediately followed after Hayashi and the others.
Some of them had simply chosen the same course to take, but the mental and physical burden was greatly different for those who were figuring out their path as they walked and those who merely followed along everyone else.
On the other hand, there were also teams that had chosen to head in a completely different direction from the Hamamatsu Central team.
Homura made a show of looking over her map while moving to follow along with the second group.
The entire island was roughly shaped like the letter ‘a’.
The start/goal point was located on the southeast edge of the island, near the lower-right corner of the map.
Located at the lower center part of the ‘a’ was a forest. The ground gently rose the further you went north, until it turned into a hill that was visible even from the start point.
The upper right edge of the ‘a’—in other words, the protruding section that curved out from the north towards the sea—served as a long and narrow peninsula.
The Hamamatsu Central pair and the group that followed them were heading towards the north, while the rest were headed towards the western area of the island.
“All the teams have clustered into two groups, Inari-senpai.”

Inari and Homura watched the direction the second group was heading in from behind.
“Yeah. Everything is just as expected so far. One group plans to circle clockwise around the island while the other intends to go counter-clockwise.”
Inari pointed at two routes on the map with her finger.
“Look, Homura. There’s a pattern to how the checkpoints are scattered across the race field—Do you see it?”
Inari continued walking leisurely as if there were no hurry.
“……”
Bracing herself inwardly, Homura looked over the map again.
“If I had to make a guess… The checkpoints inland are worth more points than the ones along the coast?”
“That’s right. Well done. And why do you think that is?” asked Inari.
“……Hmm. It’s the work of a criminal.”
Homura spoke with a seemingly serious expression—but she was obviously saying between the lines, “I have no idea at all.” Inari slapped the back of her head with the map.
“It’s because the checkpoints on the coast are easiest to find! As long as you follow the coastline, you’ll end up seeing them even without putting in much effort. The terrain there is also unobstructed. —On the other hand, your range of vision is obstructed by jungle inland. Well, they placed them in places that are easy to see even taking that into account, though. But it’s still highly likely that people will pass by a lot of them without noticing. There’s also the danger of losing track of our current location.”
“Ooh, I see. What keen insight, Inari-senpai!”
“Haven’t you noticed anything else?” Inari asked again with an unforgiving stare.
“…Don’t the checkpoints marked with [?] instead of a point score make you curious!? These are clearly meant for turning the tables in a single stroke, right?”
Such game-like mechanics were the only things that caught Homura’s attention.
“Well, it’s true that that’s a common trope in races like this … Especially the one far away at the edge of the northern peninsula. But these are definitely traps. I really don’t get the thought processes of playful people who come up with weird pranks like this.”
Suddenly, Homura raised her hand like an eager student in class.
“I have proposal, inspector. Let’s split up! I’ll go clockwise and you go counter-clockwise! If we each gather checkpoints we’ll get double the points!”
“Impossible. We each have our own map, but we only have one score card.”
“Ugh… I-I was just joking. I don’t have the courage to search on my own anyway.”

“Courage? You do realize that you’d have to search on your own if this were a normal orienteering game, right?”
Inari looked at Homura in exasperation.
“That’s how it is, so make sure you properly read the map too—ah, never mind! I hereby announce that we’ll divvy up roles! Homura, you’re on lookout duty!”
“Lookout duty? That’s it?”
“Your job is to use your eyes to carefully search for any dangers along our path, any unique areas that stand out, and for geographical features that I tell you to look for—and for checkpoints too, of course!”
“Roger,” replied Homura with a salute.
Suddenly, an angry shout came from behind them—
“Hurry up and go, Seiran! What are you guys being so sluggish for!?”
Nanakubo spurred them on with a yell from far behind.
“Yes, we’re going!” replied Homura with an energetic wave at Nanakubo, who was remaining at the start point with the two male second years that served as the moderating assistants for the race.
A race on a completely unknown uninhabited island… and in the middle of a dense jungle with bad visibility to boot. Just where are we supposed to start from? Homura had thought discouragingly at first. However, now that Inari had given her orders and explained the tasks she needed to do in individual and concrete steps, she was surprised to find that her uneasiness was beginning to fade.
Next to her, Inari put her hands around her mouth to amplify her voice and shouted back at Nanakubo.
“Nana! We’re allowed this much of a handicap, right!?”
“———!”
Nanakubo-senpai yelled something while angrily whirling her arms so fast that she struck the boys next to her, but she was too far away and her voice was carried off by the sea breeze.
“Ahaha, what the heck is she saying?” wondered Homura.
“She said that if we’re in last place, she’ll punch us and bury us in the sand on the beach for a whole night.”
Inari’s big ears twitched facing the direction Nanakubo was in.
“I-I don’t want anything to do with that kind of old-style penalty game, thank you very much!”
Homura and Inari had chosen the clockwise course.
The counter-clockwise course, which the Hamamatsu Central team and Hayashi had headed towards, contained a thick concentration of close checkpoints and seemed at first glance like the fastest route for collecting points. However, it involved going up and down a lot of slopes and focused primarily on the inland checkpoints.
In such exhausting circumstances, being forced to choose a path across difficult terrain could easily lead to the worst case scenario of losing track

of your current location and becoming lost. That was Homura and Inari's thinking, at least.
On the other hand, the clockwise course had gentle slopes and hills, but the distance between checkpoints was wide and it required walking across long distances.
"—Ah, I found one! I found a checkpoint! It's that, right?"
"Where?"
Inari squinted her eyes in the direction Homura pointed. There was a red-white triangular prism there.
Their first checkpoint was located at an easily visible location a bit off the beach but outside the forest, making it easy for them to find.
Inari checked over the map.
"On high ground, huh… All right. Homura, you stay here."
"Will you be okay getting it on your own?"
"I'll be right back. You stay here at this height. If we both climb up there and come back down here, we might lose our bearings."
"All right."
Also, this helped reduce Homura's exhaustion.
While Homura inwardly felt relieved even as she felt bad about being the only one taking it easy, Inari ran off with their score card in hand.
Inari once more displayed shocking agility as she jumped from branch to branch and ran up the rockface.
Just as she'd declared, she came back in less than five minutes.
"Here—we've got the [H] checkpoint."
Inari showed the score card to Homura.
A stamp that appeared to be from the checkpoint was now in the first box on the card.
The stamp contained the letter [H] and a score number surrounded by a unique patterned border. Most likely, each stamp had a different border pattern to prevent participants from cheating.
"…5 points… That's a low score number."
Well, they'd already known that since this checkpoint's score was labeled on the map as well.
"This is just our first one, so let's hurry on, okay?"
"Ye~s."
Right around the time they were approaching their third checkpoint, Inari's ears suddenly twitched, and she turned to look behind them.
Baaaaaang…
That far-off echo of an explosive sound reached Homura's ears as well.
The two of them were currently walking through a sparse section of the forest.
They managed to catch sight of white smoke rising up from somewhere far back outside of the forest.
"…What's that?" wondered Inari.

“It’s probably the one hour mark signal. I was thinking it was about time for it.”
Inari nodded in comprehension, but then frowned
“But still, a smoke signal spell…? Was there such a convenient piece of magic? Did you know about it?”
“Err, I guess—but I only learned about it today. They talked about it during the Nadahama High presentation. Who do you think fired the signal just now?”
“Not Nana, that’s for sure. But wow, magic research is really making steady progress.”
The signal just now was white smoke, but they’d explained during the presentation that soon it’d become possible to release different colored smoke signals as well.
“I’ve used smoke signal guns before, but I find those scary since they sometimes misfire. Homura, how about you learn that spell yourself? Doesn’t it seem convenient?”
“Yeah, but they explained that caution is needed when casting it… They mentioned something about special training being necessary.
While it was certainly convenient, Homura also didn’t want to create a reputation of being skilled at only smoke magic.
Shortly thereafter, Homura and Inari reached the lower left side of the island on the map.
They were collecting checkpoints at a good pace, but they hadn’t seen any of the teams ahead of them so far.
Homura felt anxious at the thought of how much their late start might be costing them.
And there was another problem.
According to the map, there was a small peninsula that curved south ahead. And near the end of it was a checkpoint with an unknown score.
Homura and Inari discussed what to do about it with the map and compass in hand.
“What should we do…? If we try to get that one… going there and back will cost us a lot of time.”
“Yeah… It’d be great if it was worth a lot of points, but if not… Mumumu.”
…It’d end up being a complete waste of time, in other words.
“Only an hour and a half has passed so far since the start. We’ve already finished a third of our planned route… There’ll probably be more perilous locations to pass through ahead, but our pace isn’t bad. Now then…”
“Since it’s at the edge of the peninsula, it’s unlikely that the checkpoint is somewhere hard to find.”
“Yeah, you’ve got a point—”
Suddenly, Inari raised her head and stared deep into the forest. Her pupils reflectively retracted from the sunlight that hit her face.
“Someone’s coming.”
“—A-Another Exploration Club member?” asked Homura in a nervous tone.

“It’d be scary if it weren’t.”
A group was coming their way, heading northwards from the direction of the very peninsula they’d been discussing just now.
They suddenly came into view. It was the team from Nagumo High.
“…Wah! Nagashino-san?”
“Ah… Hinooka-san. And—”
The one who swiftly replied was Nagashino, the moderating assistant during the SA meeting.
Nagashino gave a small bow and greeting while giving off a brooding and tense attitude, and then hurriedly continued past them.
Her partner, a male student, cheerfully waved back at them over his shoulder while going off with Nagashino.
“They left in quite a hurry. Like they had to move at a really fast pace.”
“Who was that?” asked Inari.
“Nagashino-san from Nagumo High. The boy with her was Hiraoka-kun, if I remember right.”
For an instant, Nagashino had glared at Inari with an extremely harsh gaze when she first noticed her.
A first year and novice member like her shouldn’t be directly acquainted with a member who hadn’t been attending club for a year (and still technically wasn’t) like Inari, though.
However, Homura had no time to ponder that oddity, as Inari spoked up again.
“I see—Ah, looks like another group coming back from the peninsula heading this way.”
Right after Nagashino’s team left, the team from Tomakomai Denpa appeared.
Himekawa-san… and Kuwazono-kun…
Seeing the two of them in their transformed appearances here in the jungle really made Homura once more conscious of the fact that they were on another world.
“Himekawa-san.”
“Hinooka-san. So you’ve come this way too.”
Homura shook hands with Himekawa, who was panting for breath.
“It’s no good. The southern checkpoint is a trap. It’s a complete failure.”
“Oh my.”
Despite her words, Himekawa’s usual dispassionate tone didn’t really make it sound as if it’d be a failure.
“I can’t tell you too much since it would spoil the fun of the race, but I can’t recommend going after it.”
“U-Understood.”
Homura looked to Inari for agreement. Inari immediately nodded.
“Sorry for making you stop. Let’s go!”
With Homura’s encouraging shout, the four of them resumed running through the jungle.

As they ran, Homura started a conversation.
“We saw Nagashino-san! She looked like she was on the verge of crying.”
“I know how she feels. The results from that checkpoint were quite severe, motivationally speaking.”
“By the way, what was the score of that mysterious checkpoint?”
Homura asked without a shred of reservation. My, my.
“Though telling the specifics is a bit of a spoiler, it was only worth three points.”
“Gyah!”
“Moreover, it was located somewhere hard to reach, and we unexpectedly wasted a lot of time and effort to get to it. Nagashino-san and her partner arrived after us—”
Himekawa stopped talking as she was almost entirely out of breath, so Kuwazono took over the explanation.
“It would have been pitiful if we left without saying anything, so Shizune-san told them the checkpoint’s score.”
“I was merely thinking out loud in passing.”
After that, Nagashino’s team gave up on that checkpoint and headed straight back immediately.
“They didn’t thank us for the info either,” said Kuwazono as he shrugged his ears instead of his shoulders.
“It’s fine, it’s not like we needed any.”
Himekawa really didn’t seem to mind.
“…By the way, Hinooka-san, shouldn’t you guys start running seriously soon?”
“Eh… Faster than this?”
Investigators typically had their physical strength enhanced and their sense of balance strengthened on Nutella. It was thanks to that that they were able to run through a jungle with uncertain footing and lots of ups and downs like this.
Up till now, Homura and Inari had run side by side so they could easily talk to each other, but they had still maintained a pretty fast pace.
However, Himekawa and Kuwazono merely exchanged a look, and then,
“Well, see ya later.”
After that short farewell, they increased their speed even further.
Both Himekawa and Kuwazono looked as if they were leaping with each step.
“Ooh, that’s amazing. There’s no way I could keep running at that pace,” said Inari in admiration.
Homura’s initial impression of the two Hiyoshizaka High team members was completely overturned, which actually made her feel a bit relieved.
Also, Himekawa was running at that superb speed without checking the Bagel above or her compass as well. Though Homura hadn’t really asked her about it, she assumed that Himekawa had an ability that allowed her to

see geomagnetic waves like Misasagi-senpai, thereby letting her innately grasp her bearings.
“There are a lot of merits to being a Trans, aren’t there~? I’m envious~…”
“You mean their leg strength? In that case, you’ve got it wrong,” said Inari with a shake of her head. “That’s due to their bodies having adapted to gravity at high latitudes. Homura, haven’t you noticed? Compared to the area Seiran is in charge of, this uninhabited island’s gravity—and the shape of the ocean’s waves are—”
Just as Inari was about to explain, Homura’s pace suddenly began to slow down.
“Senpai… I’m hungry…”
“What? Geez. That’s why you’re acting all weary and limp?”
Inari took out three light green fruits the size of small eggs from her parka’s pocket and handed them to Homura, with no sign of stinginess at all.
“I found and picked these up while going around the checkpoints. They’re called something like renbu or denbu, I think. They’re edible, of course. The taste is so-so. They’re sweeter than most Earth fruit.”
“You’re giving them all to me? You don’t want any for yourself, senpai?”
Upon hearing that question, Inari looked away while putting a hand over her mouth.
“I already ate a ton earlier.”
“What? That’s unfair, senpai!! That’s why you’ve been so full of energy!?”
“I told you to carefully observe the forest yourself, remember?”
The fruits lacked much moisture, but it had a crunchy texture and good flavor.
After that, Homura and Inari headed north across the west side of the island.
To use a clock as a visual example, they were heading from the direction of 8 o’clock to 11 o’clock.
They were following a zigzagging course where they steadfastly obtained the points along the coast while turning inland every once and a while without majorly diverting their course.
This was a very tiring process for not only Homura but Inari as well.
Not only was taking a zigzagging path on uneven terrain quite exhausting, but their overall course also took them on a gradual upward slope that they had to ascend, and their view was often obstructed.
However, they did encounter some bits of good fortune as well.
Along the way, Homura and Inari passed by the Kanazawa Asano team, who had already gone halfway around the island. This was the club from the co-ed school that was actually closer to a girls’ school.
When they ran into each other, Iguchi, the female student who was Otomaru’s partner, clearly viewed Homura and Inari as rivals and forcefully tried to pull along Otomaru by the arm when he tried to exchange information with them.
Even so, Otomaru somehow held his ground, impressing Homura.

According to Otomaru's thinking, this kind of opportunity to talk and converse with each other might be more precious and valuable than the exact results of the race… If that really was part of the intended purpose of this secret gathering, Homura couldn't help feeling amazed by the superb acting of the upperclassmen.
"We're part of the 'faction that gave up'. Now that I think back on it, we might have seriously gotten tricked by Hayashi-senpai, you know!?"
"Faction that gave up?"
"Maru! Maru-kun! It's almost time for the third signal, remember!?" said Iguchi noisily. 'Maru' was Otomaru-kun's nickname. Many of his senpai apparently called him by the teasing nickname Omaru[3] as well.
"T-Then what about the faction that hasn't given up?"
According to Otomaru's brief report as Iguchi tried to urge him to leave—
The hill that stretched across the northern coast was common knowledge to all the participants, but when they'd actually arrived there, it was apparently much steeper and more treacherous than was indicated on the map. It served as a precipitous cliff that cut off the rest of the island from the northern peninsula.
"After learning that, the best course of action would have been to survey the terrain and search for a way around it while slowly approaching the cliff. But—"
"Everyone ended up rushing it after Hayashi-kun incited the Hamamatsu Central team, right?" guessed Inari with an exasperated smile.
"That's right. Because of that, we reached the cliff right away and weren't able to immediately find a path past it."
"Geez… The map they gave us was completely off…" complained Iguchi in frustration.
"—Hmm."
At that moment, Inari pointed at a far-off corner of the sky.
Homura and the other two first years hadn't noticed it, but there was a trail of smoke drifting high up in the sky there.
—The third signal! Half of the race's time limit is already passed!
Homura frantically turned back to Otomaru.
"Just telling us that is more than enough. Thanks, Otomaru-kun, and Iguchi-san too. You guys can go on ahead."
"Yes, yes, you're welcome!" said Iguchi as she hurried to move on.
"We're heading inland to gather all the checkpoints there. That's our only chance of making a comeback now."
"Don't go blabbing that, Marucchi! Aah, I hate this! I hate bugs!"
After that final shriek from Iguchi, the Kanazawa Asano team leaped off into the jungle.
"B-Be careful!" shouted Homura as she saw them head off, deep into the denser regions of the jungle that even Homura and Inari had purposefully avoided venturing into…
"I can't believe the map was wrong…"

“It’s a common occurrence. The teams in the ‘faction that hasn’t given up’ must still be trying to get past that precipitous cliff.”
Inari calmly analyzed the situation, while Homura turned pale.
“Y-You mean they’re rock climbing? Ah, none of us have the necessary tools, so free climbing instead? In other words, bouldering?”
“There’s no other feasible option… I can’t help but feel impressed if they actually try to do it,” said Inari.
Homura gulped. She was concerned about how Nagashino and Himekawa were doing ahead of them as well, but right now they needed to focus on their own plan of action.
“Do you think it’s possible to find a path through it if we cautiously approach like Otomaru-kun said?”
“Yeah. As long as you know that the map is wrong ahead of time, that is.”
This is probably one of the things that Nanakubo-senpai had purposefully kept silent about… thought Homura as she glared at the map.
Inari was a strong and reliable ally to have, but their speed as a team fell behind everyone else’s and they had already been passed by several other teams. If they wanted to make a comeback and win, they had no choice but to aim for the more difficult checkpoints with high scores, but Homura shied away from the thought of going deep into the jungle like Otomaru-kun’s team.
In that case, their only other option was the unknown checkpoint at the end of the northern peninsula.
However, it was on the other side of a precipitous cliff that they didn’t even know if they could get past.
After simply declaring, “The final right to decide lies with the leading actor here, Homura”, Inari patiently waited as Homura agonized over what to do.
…Her way of doings things is different from both Touya-kun’s and Misasagi-senpai’s.
If Touya were here, he probably would have quickly chosen a path to take and thereby closed off Homura’s illusionary means of escape.
And what about Misasagi-senpai…? No, this was a situation where Homura couldn’t rely on senpai in the first place.
However, the fact that Homura had to decide for herself made her extremely anxious.
After finally resolving herself, Homura spoke an idea she’d thought of while nervously gauging Inari’s reaction.
“Actually… there’s something that caught my eye…”
“Hmm?”
Chapter 8 END

OSAKA PREFECTURAL SCHOOL
NAGUMO HIGH
SECOND YEAR STUDENT

NANAKUBO KOEDA

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) Iriomote Island is part of the southwestern most island group in the Okinawa Prefecture and is located near Taiwan.

(2) Allez is the French word for “Go”.

(3) Omaru means “bedpan” in Japanese.

Chapter 9

“The ebb and flow of the tide?” repeated Inari.
“The ebb and flow of the tide,” affirmed Homura.
There were no checkpoints along the northwestern shore on the map. Normally, this would be an area that they wouldn’t need to approach during the race.
Following Homura’s proposal, the Seiran High team had decided to head there regardless. Her plan was not only doubtful, but desperate as well.
They were walking while paying careful attention to the ground which had shifted to a sudden downward slope.
“My instincts are quite good at times when I have zero confidence in it, you know?”
“That makes me feel very reassured, as much as Godzilla felt when he boarded the large boat,” replied Inari sarcastically while brushing away the branches before her. “Now then, what will we find there…?”
The trees parted to reveal the scene before them.
The two of them had arrived on top of a cliff facing the sea. This was truly where land ended and the sea began.
The northern peninsula lay stretched out over the sea four or five kilometers away from them to their right.
“Hmm… I admit it looks like a good place to fish, but…”
“……”
From above came the blazing sunshine and the radiance of the Bagel cutting across the sky like a polished blade. All that light was reflected dazzlingly by the sea waves that filled their view as far as the eye could see.
While shielding her eyes from the blinding light, Homura looked down at the seashore below the cliff.
On the map, the cliff served as a barrier that cut off all passage to the base of the peninsula.
A rough rocky area lay spread out below. However, it wasn’t so devoid of footholds that it completely denied human access.
Even so, it was still a treacherous-looking place.
“Hey, I have a question for you, Inari-senpai. Is the tide coming in or receding right now?”
“It’s ebb tide. It’s just about time for the tide to recede.”
“Wow, you can tell that?”
Homura, who had asked the question like a quiz show host despite not knowing the answer herself, was honestly impressed.
“There are several tide pools that are formed along the rocky beach. Those are submerged into the ocean at full tide and have ocean water and fish left trapped in them afterwards. See?”

“Hoho—correct answer!”
“Yeah, yeah… You’re really a weird girl, you know?” said Inari in exasperation.
“I wonder how long it will be until low tide—actually, what’s the interval between the rise and ebb of Nutella’s tides?”
“I suppose it’s only natural you’re still inexperienced with the sea in Seiran High’s explorations… Anyway, it’s much more complex here than on Earth. It involves Nutella’s rotation and stellar revolution, the arrangement of the natural satellites, the Bagel’s something or other perturbation cycle… Ah geez, I’m not that knowledge about that kind of thing. Basically, it follows about a twelve hour cycle.”
But even if they knew the cycle period, this place was on the opposite side of the island from where Nanakubo was, so they wouldn’t be able to see the smoke signal to count the hours here.
“…The ocean is really bright, isn’t it?”
“You got that right. My eyes are burning from the ultraviolet rays… I wish I had sunglasses…”
“No, not that. I mean it’s a bright color.”
“Hmm?”
The two of them squinted their eyes and stared at the ocean.
Their eyes weren’t accustomed to the brightness, but they could still see that the ocean’s color gradation resembled that of the ocean around Iriomote Island.
“Hmm, you’re right. Is it unexpectedly shallow around here? I think I heard about this kind of terrain from someone. Umm, let me see…”
“……Someone’s… walking on the water…”
“Ah, right, right. It’s a lagoon, a lagoon… Eeeh!?”
Inari’s voice turned shocked as she realized what Homura had said. Inari strained her eyes to the left where Homura was looking—
Indeed, there were human-shaped silhouettes nearly hidden by the brightness of the waves on top of the ocean in the opposite direction from the peninsula.
Homura and Inari hurriedly ran over in that direction, and coincidentally enough, they found a natural staircase that descended the cliff and managed to walk down to the rocky beach which was dry at low tide.
“—Who is that?”
The silhouettes appeared to be two male students. In that case…
As Homura recalled the new members that were introduced earlier today, Inari spoke up in an excited tone.
“This is…! Are they crossing over the rim of a reef margin!?”
The coral reef margin extended from the beach at the bottom of the cliff outwards into the ocean.
“Fufufu. Did you finally realize my plan?” Homura wore a triumphant look.
“By the way, what’s a reef margin?”

“It’s the edge of a coral reef! Look, there’s a slight path beneath the water! …And wasn’t your plan to find a secret path on the rocky beach along the island? This is the complete opposite of what you had in mind.”
“The water’s so warm! Doesn’t it look like it’s sparkling underneath?”
“Hey, it’s dangerous to skip through the water like that! Homura!”
Inari’s warning didn’t reach Homura’s ears. Her excitement was only natural, considering how disappointed she’d been at having her chance at a liberal vacation at Okinawa snatched away.
“Yo.”
“Hey there.”
The two boys, who had looked to be walking on water but were actually wading through the waves up to their calves, called out to greet Inari and Homura from where they stood on the reef margin.
The two boys acted calm and composed here, so much so that Homura almost expected them to say “Ah, we’re natives here”. And the contrast between the clear blue sky and vivid ocean made the unreal atmosphere of this place very prominent.
“See, look. They’re the Seiran team, just like I thought.”
“The water’s deep over there so you shouldn’t approach. It’s dangerous.”
The two boys on the reef margin turned out to be from the Nagato Fisheries School.
Their school club had done the presentation on slimy-looking coastal aquatic life that had greatly interested Ameno.
Their names were Nagusa and Ishimi.
Ishimi was the one who called out a warning to Homura as she stumbled in the water. Nagusa was squatting in the ocean up to his waist and peering into the water.
“You girls should head back to the island.”
“If you came because you saw us out here, then I apologize for making you worry, but—”
Homura blinked in surprised at their words, which far differed from her expectations.
“Eh? What are you two doing out here? What about the race?”
“We’re not interested in the race.”
“There’s no way we could waste this opportunity, you know?”
Their replies showed just how much they were sea life maniacs. They were both well-tanned.
Inari questioned the two of them with eyes sparkling with interest.
“Hey, does this reef margin continue all the way to the tip of the northern peninsula?”
“Yes.”
“Of course.”
The two boys nodded casually.

“It’s because this serves as a huge bay. Once it’s completely low tide, parts of the reef flat will probably be exposed here and there. I can’t wait!” exclaimed Nagusa.
“We’ll have to return to the starting point before then, though,” Ishimi pointed out.
It appeared that Ishimi was slightly more prudent than Nagusa.
Homura questioned Ishimi about her idea.
“Hey, is it possible for us to walk along the entire reef margin all the way over there?” asked Homura while pointing from their feet to the edge of the northern peninsula.
“That’s probably impossible. It’s shallow here, but it’s doubtful that it’s like that the whole stretch.”
“You might be able to make it if you swim part of the way,” suggested Nagusa.
“No, the ocean currents are really bad, especially at ebb tide. One mistake and you’ll end up drifting out to sea.”
Even as they stop on top of the calm water, the tide was continuing to recede.
Various bits of coral reef began to poke out of the water along the line of the reef margin that formed the bay.
The original ‘a’ shape of the island was now connected with the dotted line of the coral reef and was beginning to change into the rough shape of the Greek letter ‘θ’ (theta).
“Hinooka-san, you’re an aspiring mage, right? Can you use liquid-type magic?”
“You mean using a limited Icosa (twenty-sided) model?” Homura regrettably shook her head. “But, maybe if it were senpai—”
Those words made the two boys turn to look at Inari.
Inari sullenly turned her face away in a huff. Homura waved her hands frantically at the clear misunderstanding.
“Ah, no. By senpai, I mean Misasagi-senpai. She told me that that kind of magic is her specialty.”
Homura hadn’t heard anything about Inari being talented at magic.
“Should I accompany you guys just to be safe, then?” asked Nagusa.
“Cut it out. If you help them that obviously, it’ll probably be a breach of the race’s rules,” Ishimi chided.
“You can use magic, Nagusa-kun?”
“Not really. But I’m great at swimming. And I’ve done first-aid training!”
“As if that’s enough. Even if this is a race, we can’t let our guards down. Even with a lifejacket, you might not be able to come back if you drift out to sea.”
“So that’s why liquid-type magic is needed…?”
Ishimi nodded.
True, if they had magic that could manipulate the water currents, they could use it as an engine to move freely within water.

As someone whose memory of drifting helplessly within a cold lake was still fresh, Homura understood from experience how that kind of magic might determine whether you lived or died in such a situation.
“Enhalus flowers!”
Nagusa completely turned aside the conversation as his eyes sparkled with excitement at his discovery.
These flowers, which drifted across the surface of the clear water, were the source of the glittering Homura had noticed earlier.
At close inspection, the grain-size pure white flowers covered the surface of the sea around them.
If this weren’t the middle of a race, they would have been able to gaze at this amazing, fantasy-like scene at their leisure, but… The thought made Homura feel disappointed from the bottom of her heart.
“Homura, I’m going to make sure your jacket is properly buckled up.”
“Ah, sure.”
Inari approached Homura.
She buckled up the jacket that Homura had been loosely wearing and also securely retightened her belt. She then double-checked her own jacket and seemed to be getting psyched up.
“We’re going…?” asked Homura.
“We won’t know until we try,” said Inari encouragingly.
“Then let’s try going as far as we can for the time being…”
Though this was an expansion of Homura’s original plan, she couldn’t help but think that this was quite reckless.
However, if it worked out, they’d be able to reach the blocked off northern peninsula.
The score of the checkpoint there was still unknown, but it could let them come back from being behind in the race depending on the scores of the other teams.
With the two Nagato Fisheries boys calling out cheers of support and well-wishes for their safety from behind, Homura and Inari began to walk along the reef margin.
“Make sure you guys watch out for sharks too, okay?” Homura shouted back jokingly to their cheers.
“As if sharks would enter a reef pool like this!” yelled Ishimi.
“Meeting sharks would be great. I love sharks!” shouted Nagusa as he waved both hands.
There were about three kilometers between them and the opposite shore on the peninsula.
They had to follow a curved path that turned out to sea. With low tide approaching, the path gradually appeared beneath the water. It showed promise. However…
“How do we get back?”
“Hmm… It’d be best if we returned on foot over the peninsula. There seems to be some high score checkpoints located along the rest of the peninsula

and the terrain makes it unlikely to get lost there, so it's definitely worth doing," suggested Inari.
"But that might be quite reckless in its own way. It might dig into our traveling time too much… Isn't it about time for the fourth smoke signal to be fired…?"
"No, more importantly, the return from the peninsula—"
Inari was about to say something, but then shook her head with a "Never mind" and resumed stepping firmly along the coral reef while making splashes as she waded her legs through the water.
There were some spots along the way where they ended up submerged up to their waists, but thanks to the approaching low tide and the receding water level, their path through the sea water became increasingly easier to walk on.
When they had reached a certain point with only one kilometer remaining till the peninsula, Homura and Inari came to a stop.
"……"
"Oh my… this is…"
The Enhalus flowers covering the water surface were being pulled in by the sea current, which made it clear that the water within the lagoon was flowing outwards towards the ocean.
In front of them, the reef margin path cut off and had a gap of about thirty meters of deep waters before it resumed again.
"It… doesn't look like we'll be able to walk… even if we wait for the tide to recede a bit more…"
The water in the gap appeared to be about ten meters deep. The current was flowing strongly and formed a whirlpool further out towards the ocean. It looked very dangerous to cross.
"……"
Inari sat down on the edge of the path and glared down at the water, and then she put her face past the water surface and peered down into the clear water depths.
Lifting her head back up, Inari turned to Homura as water was sent flying from her hair.
"Homura… Are you good at going underwater?"
"I-If it's for only five seconds, I guess…?"
"I'm not talking about merely washing your face like in a bath." Inari turned to reconfirm the direction they were headed towards. "We're going to have to traverse through the water a bit…"
Inari stood up with a determined expression. She suddenly began to take off her life jacket.
"W-What are you doing?"
"Listen, you stay here, Homura. Once I reach the other side, throw this over to me."
Inari pushed the removed life jacket into Homura's hands.

Then, after taking a deep breath, Inari dived into the water with a huge splash.
“You’re going to swim over!?” shouted Homura in surprise, though it was doubtful whether Inari actually managed to hear her.
Swimming freestyle, Inari didn’t head directly to where the reef margin path resumed, but instead veered right at a 45 degree angle towards the inner section of the reef pool.
“……”
Homura could clearly see even from where she stood the way Inari swam with her head under like a torpedo.
However, she still had to occasionally rise to the surface for air.
“Senpai, a strong current is coming…!”
Immediately after rising up for a deep breath, Inari dived down and grabbed part of the coral on the sea bottom.
She withstood the current for a few seconds like that, and then she started to advance by crawling through the water using her arm strength.
After she advanced deep underwater like that for a while, the current trying to wash away Inari seemed to subside.
Inari let go and kicked off the coral reef, and then began to swim rapidly at a slanted angle to the left in order to surface.
“……Phew.”
When she saw Inari appear on top of the visible reef margin on the other side and wave her hand, Homura let out a deep sigh of relief.
Inari’s mannerisms as she shook her body and sent the water flying off her were very much like those of an animal.
Just as she was told, Homura tossed Inari’s jacket at her over the water, and then she put her hand on the belt of her own jacket to take it off.
“All right… It’s my turn next…!”
As Homura resolved herself to cross next, Inari called out to her from the other side.
“Homura! You go on and head back to the island!”
“Eeeh!?”
“I’ll head to the northern peninsula and return over it by myself!”
“Why!?”
“This current is too much for you. Besides, if I have to match your pace, we probably won’t make it in time.”
“So mean! But roger that!”
“…Hey, at least try to object a little! Why are you only meek and obedient at times like this!?”
“You’re the one who’s ‘meek[1]’, Senpai!!”
You’re fine just the way you are, Homura.
Wholeheartedly relying on others when she needed to was Homura’s nature. And trying to rely on others even when not necessary was Homura’s way of being amiable and cordial.
“We’ll meet up at the N checkpoint. Got it!?” asked Inari.

“Yes, the N checkpoint! It’s a promise, right!?” Homura waved her pinky finger[2] in the air frantically.
The N checkpoint was the location that people had to pass through if they intended to make a huge detour to reach the northern coast. Homura began to quickly head back along the reef margin.
“—Hmm?”
Did she just see something traverse through the water out of the corner of her eye? But when she turned around, there was nothing in the water.
“Was that… seaweed?”
After reluctantly looking at Inari, who quickly became distant with her surprising leg strength, Homura turned around to head back.
Nagusa and Ishimi were no longer where she’d encountered them earlier, having moved to the inner section of the vast lagoon. The reef flat they’d spoke of had begun to appear inside the bay.
With each step Homura took, crabs reacted and swiftly ran away from the reef flat.
Small fish of various colors had been left behind within the tide pools, like tubes of natural colors had gained life.
Homura had to reach the rendezvous point with Inari as soon as possible, but she was entranced by all the sights she was witnessing for the first time one after another.
The observation point that Nagusa and Ishimi had moved to appeared to be much further back inside the bay. They didn’t notice Homura at all as she retraced her route.
Homura ran while repeatedly making ripples across the calm water with her beach shoes.
Surrounding her was the emerald green sea in every direction.
She even started humming as her thoughts wandered.
Homura hadn’t expected for Inari-senpai to go this far to help her.
Though, she clearly maintained her attitude that she was ‘only giving the unreliable Homura a hand’.
What was Hayashi-senpai planning that Inari suspected…? Homura still didn’t understand the reasons behind the male senpai’s actions.
It would have been better if they could have cooperated with Hiyoshizaka High.
The way he had instigated the other teams right at the start of the race had been beneficial in the end, but she had no idea how much of it had been planned on his part, considering they were in such a strange and unknown place.
In the first place, Hayashi-senpai’s actions had basically caused the Hiyoshizaka team to self-destruct while bringing down other teams with them, thereby dashing their chances of victory. Well, winning might have been a difficult prospect from the start considering that Kanae was pretty much asleep on her feet, but still…

Is there still some secret that's been hidden from me…? That flash of suspicion suddenly hit Homura.
"…Wah!"
While she was lost in her thoughts, Homura slipped her foot on a piece of smooth coral eroded by the tides and plunged into a tide pool, creating a huge splash.
"Ugh~… And just when I was in a good mood…"
Fortunately, she hadn't sustained any injuries.
Homura lay in a ridiculous posed with her upper body and legs sticking out from the tide pool.
I hope no one saw that… She surveyed her surroundings in embarrassment.
"……?"
She caught sight of Nagusa and Ishimi, who were passionately continuing their observations while repeatedly diving and resurfacing in a deep part of the lagoon.
And there was a bluish-black fin sticking out of the water and approaching them from behind…
—Eh, a fin? A shark?
She didn't have any time to check it out any further, as the unknown fin calmly headed towards Nagusa and Ishimi at an accelerated pace.
"…Eh? Wait, wait, wait—"
Homura sprang up from the tide pool in a panic.
In the process, she banged her elbow against a protruding piece of coral.
"…Ah, oww…"
The sensation in her struck arm turned numb for an instant.
"N-Nagusa-kun! Ishimi-kun!!"
However, just when Homura called out to them, the two of them dived underwater at the same time.
"T-There's a shark! A shark! Damn it, can't you hear me!?"
At this moment, she didn't care if people called her the noisy girl who cried wolf (or rather, shark). Homura yelled out as loud as she could.
With no other option now except to get close, Homura jumped forward while aiming towards the coral reef path on the water.
It wasn't a very skillful jump, but she was going as fast as she could.
The two boys were exploring a hollow the size of a twenty-five meter pool surrounded by coral reef.
Their life jackets had been left defenceless on the surface of the coral.
"Phew—"
After Homura ran near to the pool, Ishimi was the first one to surface.
"Ishimi-kun!"
"Uwah—What, Hinooka-san? You came back?"
"Now's not the time for that. There's a shark, a shark is here!"
"Ahaha, did your eyes play tricks on you? There's no way a shark would be in a lagoon like this—"

Ishimi laughed while treading water, but when he more carefully looked over Homura, his eyes widened.
“Hinooka-san, your arm, your arm! It’s bleeding.”
“……”
Not listing to Ishimi’s words, Homura looked down into the water and searched for Nagusa.
“There he is—”
Nagusa was staring at a perpendicular wall of coral reef and was neglecting to pay attention to his rear.
Homura was relieved at finding Nagusa, but immediately after, a chill ran down her skin.
The outline of some underwater creature could be seen approaching by smoothly navigating the canals that served as the lagoon’s highways—
“…No way, for real?”
Seeing Homura desperately point at the water, Ishimi finally stopped thinking it was a joke.
He took a deep breath and kicked off a nearby coral reef wall to dive back down to where Nagusa was.
Ishimi fiercely swam down and frantically tapped Nagusa on the shoulder, but at that same moment, the nose of the shark that had been gradually rising through the water brushed against Nagusa’s bare feet.
Nagusa let out a burst of air bubbles in surprise as the sudden sensation and impact.
The shark didn’t give up and thrusted its chin forward again and again to try and bite down on Nagusa’s feet.
Nagusa wildly thrashed in the water and his foot hit the shark on the side of its face, causing it to flinch and recoil for an instant.
Ishimi grabbed Nagusa’s arm and the two of them swam back towards the ledge that served as a foothold back to the surface.
Homura gulped as she watched it all from above the water surface, like she was seeing a silent film.
She reprimanded her fearfully trembling feet and took a step forward.
“Hi (Hydrogen)—”
Homura began to cast a spell incantation while placing her hand on the buckle of her jacket.
The shark, after temporarily retreating, calmly circled back and increased its speed underwater as it swam towards the two boys again.
Ishimi and Nagusa were desperately swimming towards the ledge—but even if they reached it in time, there weren’t enough handholds there for two people to climb up at the same time.
They wouldn’t make it…
Homura impatiently threw off her jacket and then took an approach run to jump out, diving into the water behind the two boys.
—She was suddenly surrounded by a blue world of silence.

As she slowly sank down through the underwater temple, Homura twisted her body to face the tarrying pursuer.
Ox (Oxygen)… Ph (Phosphorous)…
By the time she caught sight of the shark, it was already right before her eyes.
Homura thrust out her arm and completed the last of the pattern.
—Mg (Magnesium!
A bright, white hot line manifested underwater.
It knit itself together in geometric patterns while swaying and formed a sphere the size of volleyball. It was one of Homura’s few incantations, the fireball spell.
…Kuh……!
For an instant, an abnormal noise was produced and overwhelmed her ears —
And then the glowing sphere soon dulled to the color of silver and became a lump with a mirror-like surface. It looked like a huge bubble, lacking any detectable heat or sense of threat.

The shark merely swam around the fireball and continued to tenaciously chase after Nagusa and Ishimi.
I-In that case—!
The next instant, a fierce stream of bubbles rose up within the water with the silver fireball at their center.
The advancing shark suddenly dipped down its nose and turned downwards to avoid them.
Homura released her concentration, which caused errors to appear in the fireball's pattern and made it burst and scatter into countless small beams of light.
"Pwaah—"
Homura brought her face to the surface, which was foaming from the scattered bubbles.
She could tell that she hadn't swum as well as she'd thought.
"Hinooka-san, over here—!"
She heard the splash of someone jumping back in the water.
Either Ishimi or Nagusa had called out to her from behind, but she didn't have the time or allowance to turn around right now.
Come to think of it, I forgot to take off my shoes first...
While remaining fearful of the shark even after she lost sight of it, Homura treaded water and slowly moved her heavy body backwards.
Eventually, Homura noticed that something was clearly off.
First she felt it on her skin. And then she saw it—
"…W-What?"
A huge whirlpool was forming on the surface of the lagoon as far as the eye could see.
The heaving and swelling water surface made the lagoon resemble the fiber structure of muscles, or the heterogeneous detailing style of Van Gogh's paintings.
"Kyah—"
The current literally grabbed hold of Homura.
"Uwah!"
"Hey—!"
Nagusa and Ishimi let out short shrieks. They were also promptly engulfed by the throes of the current.
Homura was roughly whipped and tossed around within the water, leaving her unable to grasp which way was up or down.
I'm being... carried up with the sea water...!
The dizzying view her eyes beheld suddenly changed. The water horizon, sun and Bagel flew into view, revolving around her in every direction.
…Wha…!?
As Homura was completely at the mercy of natural forces beyond her control, she caught sight of a tall human figure standing on the rocky beach within her upside-down field of vision.

After a suffocating experience that felt like many minutes but was actually only a few seconds, Homura was thrown out from the cluster of raging water currents alive.
She fell and landed in a tide pool the side of a bathtub at a public bathhouse.
“Uuuugh, *cough*, *cough*… That was terrible—”
While coughing out the water she’d swallowed, Homura noticed someone standing next to the tide pool.
“O-Oozore-senpai…?”
It was the vice present of the Nagumo High club, Oozore.
He looked down at Homura with a cold side glance and spoke curtly.
“—Don’t carelessly damage the natural wildlife of Nutella.”
He was wearing the same uniform he’d worn at the podium during the SA meeting.
There were beads of sweat on his face as he wore a perfectly taut necktie, but his expression at least remained cold.
However, more importantly, Oozore shouldn’t have been here on the island.
“…Umm, how did you get here? W-What about the club president meeting?”
“It’s in recess right now.”
I see… But what about the transport ring to get here? Actually, why are you here in the first place? All those questions were important, but what interested Homura the most was…
“A-Aren’t you hot…? I mean, wearing that school uniform out here…”
“……Yes, it’s hot…”
Suddenly Homura noticed the flickering shadows casted over herself and Oozore and looked up. Above them floated a giant ball of water.
It was the main body of the spell that had pulled Homura out from the lagoon.
To be precise, the ball of water wasn’t floating, but was being supported by pillars of water that were continuously sucking up the water from the lagoon and nearby tide pools.
It was a transparent blue sculpture of water that looked like it weighed a bit over a hundred tons in its entirety.
Amazing… Homura looked up at it in amazement.
Next, Ishimi and Nagusa were also spit out from the water.
“Ah! Welcome back, guys!”
Homura hurriedly stood up from the tide pool.
Homura and the two boys, who had been rescued without understanding what was going on, all gazed up at Oozore’s spell with dumbfounded expressions.
Oozore held out his arm straight in front of him, and the ball of water calmly moved away in the air in accordance with his motion.
Within the ball of water, the shark that had attacked them was now swimming around seemingly harmless as if it were in an aquarium tank.

Once it passed over the reef margin and reached the ocean proper, the ball of water silently descended and then finally sank into the ocean without breaking form until it was completely merged. The captured shark shot off into the ocean without a scratch on it.
So this is the magic of the Wizard…
Homura stared at Oozore in honest admiration.
“Oozore-senpai, sorry for the trouble.”
“Thank you very much!”
Ishimi and Nagusa bowed their heads to Oozore repeatedly.
“…”
Oozore nodded slightly and then directed his gaze behind the two boys, where there should have been no one.
As the two boys were about to turn around in confusion—
“Damn, Oozore-san stole the best part again…”
“Hii!”
“Uooh!”
The two boys were startled at the sound of that peevish murmuring voice and actually jumped in surprise.
The ocean water was flowing back into the lagoon. The voice came from the center of the lagoon.
“You two… Why are you guys splashing around in a place like this…”
It felt as if the surrounding temperature suddenly dropped.
A female club member wearing a life jacket over a swimsuit was *sitting* on the surface of the water amidst the flowing and whirling current in an utterly calm manner.
She was sitting well-balanced on her side on a black and white colored chair, about eight meters in total length with a dorsal fin on its back—
Actually, no, at closer inspection, that ‘seat’ was really a huge orca whale.
“P-President Suou…!!”
Nagusa and Ishimi gulped.
“So you guys gave up on the race from the start, huh… Even though you knew it would make things troublesome and arduous for the kids from Hakozaki High without your support…?”
As she dispassionately chided them, the boys clearly began to tremble.
That girl was the club president of the Nagato Fisheries School’s Exploration Club, Suou.
She had a slender build, covered by a racing swimsuit with light blue lines over a black background. Her long and glamorous black hair was braided nimbly behind her head so as not to get it wet.
“W-We were confident in the abilities of Yoshio’s team, s-so we thought it would be all right,” stuttered Ishimi.
While the two boys were being scolded, Homura’s interest and curiosity were completely taken by the orca.
“I-Is that a familiar—?”

“Correct, Hinooka-san. This is the orca Bobby. One of the loyal servants of our club—By the way, is the injury on your arm okay?”
Homura finally noticed her own state.
“Ah, yes, it was just grazed a little—wait, you said servants? There are others?”
“We have an entire pod of orcas!”
“I get it, this island is along the route of migration of Bobby’s pod, right!?”
Nagusa clapped his hands in understanding, but Suou just glared at him.
She beckoned them with an ominous gesture, making the two boys turn pale again.
“Nagusa, Ishimi, get over here and climb on. I’ll take you guys to the goal on the southern peninsula on my way back. I feel uneasy leaving you guys on your own after this. Naturally, you guys have been disqualified from this race, so it doesn’t break any rules. I’ll take the time to punish you guys a bit.”
“N-No objections,” Nagusa feebly replied.
“Understood, but… What about her?”
Ishimi looked concernedly at Homura, who finally came to her sense and recalled her current situation.
Oozore spoke up in his usual reserved tone.
“Hinooka-san is still in the middle of the race. If you intend to return to the goal, hurry up and go.”
“Eh—O-Of course… right?”
“Where’s Inari?”
“Inari-senpai went off by herself to the checkpoint at the northern peninsula…”
“I see. Understood.”
Suou called out to Oozore.
“Oozore-san, you coming along with us? We still have room on Bobby.”
“No, I’m fine. I’ll return by the time limit,” Oozore replied nonchalantly.
Homura bowed her head at both Oozore and Suou.
“Sorry for the trouble I caused you, Oozore-senpai, Suou-senpai—I’ll be heading off now.”
Homura sprinted off, but a voice called out to her from behind.
“Hinooka-san!”
Ishimi and Nagusa were riding behind Suou on top of the orca.
They were waving their hands at Homura.
“Thanks, Hinooka-san! You really saved us there! Good luck in the race!”
“We’ll treat you to something back on Earth!”
Homura smiled back at them.
“In that case, treat me to the Deluxe Flat Lemon ice cream!”
Eventually, Homura arrived at the N checkpoint where she was supposed to meet up with Inari.

She had followed a simple path with little chance of getting lost, but it had involved constantly climbing over hills, so she was out of breath when she arrived.
A very peeved Inari was waiting for Homura there.
“So slow……”
Inari glared as soon as she caught sight of Homura.
“You’re way too slow! What the heck were you doing!? You’ve completely wasted the lead I risked my body and soul to gain!”
Inari vehemently spewed complaints.
“I was bitten by bugs, had to take off my swimsuit, and even fell from a cliff…”
“N-Now, now, I was delayed by an act of God—”
Homura consoled Inari while calming her ragged breathing.
On closer inspection, Inari’s life jacket was now full of holes. Twigs were stuck in her hair and she had scratches all over her body.
However, the score card, which had become worn out in a short amount of time, now proudly held the various stamps that served as proof of having magnificently conquered the northern peninsula.
The unknown checkpoint from the northernmost tip of the peninsula—was a whopping 55 points! However…
“At this point… there’s no way we’ll make it back in time. I’ve already cried my eyes out over it.”
There really were tears in Inari’s eyes.
“B-But the smoke signals…”
“The fifth signal has already been fired! Even running at full speed in a straight line won’t let us make it to the goal in time! Aah~, and after I went so far to get involved… Nana’s going to laugh at me…”
“……I’m sorry.” Homura sadly hung her head. “….As an apology, I’ll put lots of these on you…” Claiming it was the minimum recompense she could do, Homura searched through her pouch and took out a certain packet.
“Those are patches for bug bites…”
Inari sighed at the attempt of mixed good will and light-hearted joking by Homura.
“…By the way…What are you holding under your arm there?”
Inari stared hard at the rod-shaped object that Homura had been carrying since she arrived here.
“This is… a Nutellan… magic… wand?”
“…Haah? A magic staff?”
“Yes. I searched for something I could use in place of a stick and found this by a mountain stream. It isn’t merely a wooden stick. It’s hand-carved. And it looks to be quite old too… Senpai, you were the one who told me to look through the forest carefully, remember?”
“I did say that. I did, but… Could I borrow that for a sec?”
Inari snatched the wooden rod from Homura’s hand. It was about one meter and twenty centimeters long. It had a hand grip like a baseball bat, and was

flat on the opposite end. Homura herself hadn't noticed it, but the initials 'HT' were carved in alphabetic letters on the bottom of the grip.
"…Who's HT?" asked Inari with a quizzical tilt of her head.
"Wouldn't this be worth a lot of score points in the race!? Right!?" Homura excitedly asked the dubious Inari.
"……"
After pondering for a while, Inari glared sidelong at Homura.
"…Where did you find this?"
The teams from every school had arrived one after another at the goal point on the southern side of the island.
A simple rest area had been set up beneath the shade of the rocks, where the exhausted participants were rewarded with water and fruits.
The latest team to arrive just now was Kanazawa Asano High.
Iguchi and Otomaru had returned after declaring they would cut across the jungle and plunging straight into it.
"Kanazawa Asano, goal! Welcome back!"
Nanakubo spoke to them while standing imposingly with a watch in one hand.
Otomaru showed their score card, and then Nanakubo pointed them over to the shade.
"Chiba is doing the core tallying one by one. You guys do rest for now. We have food for you too."
"Okay."
As Otomaru went to rest with his body drenched in sweat, a female student approached him.
"—Congrashulashions on gesshing back shafely."
"…Himekawa…?"
The one to greet Otomaru was Himekawa from Tomakomai Denpa, who had arrived at the goal earlier.
For some reason, she was even more woozy and unsteady on her feet than Otomaru who was exhausted from running.
When he heard the current situation of the race from Himekawa, Otomaru's eyes widened.
"Eh, Seiran still hasn't arrived? But I thought for sure we were the last ones."
Otomaru's partner Iguchi murmured with a pale white face as if she'd seen hell as he immediately squatted down on the ground.
Himekawa hung her head too when she learned Otomaru's score.
"Congrashulashions… Your sheam is now in shecond plaze. How unforshunashe, she rankings have been overshurned again…"
"…I can't really tell well because of your strange appearance, but isn't your face a bit too pale, Himekawa?"
"Don'sh worry, I'm fine."
"S-Shizune-san, y-you need to rest in the shade…"
Her partner Kuwazono worriedly ran up to her.

“I shold you nosh to call me Shizuna-san, Yuu-kun—”
“Yes, sorry…”
Otomaru and Kuwazono made the mumbling and dimly conscious Himekawa sit down in the shade and gave her water and lemon soda flavored salt tablets.
After moving away from her a bit, Kuwazono continued the conversation in her place. He whispered to Otomaru while shrinking his already short statured body even further and keeping an eye on Himekawa.
“Shizune-san seems to have heatstroke. She collapsed after pushing herself too much…”
“Oh my… That must have been pretty bad. Thank goodness she doesn’t look injured,” said Otomaru.
“I said we should just give up on the race, but…”
“She didn’t listen, right? Despite her usual cool attitude, she’s actually quite stubborn. But to think she collapsed—what happened after that?”
Kuwazano’s tone turned even more apologetic as he replied.
“Umm, I carried her…”
“…!”
Otomaru was more surprised by that than Himekawa’s unexpected rashness. But he kept that to himself without speaking it aloud and instead returned to the subject of the race.
“I see… Your team also went through a lot. Who’s currently in first place?”
Otomaru asked about the issue that concerned him the most right now.
“Hakozaki High…” replied Kuwazono.
“Eh, seriously? Then that means the teams that first headed to the hill area all failed…”
Otomaru looked over the first years who had arrived before him, and he caught sight of the two boys from Hamamatsu Central who were splayed out on the ground and Nagashino who was hanging her head in disappointment. Kuwazono followed his gaze and spoke.
“Nagashino’s Nagumo High team is currently in third place… My team is in fourth.”
Hakozaki High was part of the same ‘faction that had given up’ as Otomaru’s team, but they had chosen to leave the northern side of the island as quickly as possible the moment they saw the cliffs.
Nagusa and Ishimi, the members of the disqualified Nagato Fisheries team, had arrived at the goal point a while ago after being carried on Suou-senpai’s orca familiar and going around the island’s coast.
The members of the definitely last place Nagato Fisheries team and the top favorite Hakozaki High team were casually talking to each other without a care in the world.
Nanakubo checked her watch at regular intervals. The signal for fifteen minutes remaining had already been fired into the sky before Otomaru’s team arrived.
“……”

Otomaru and Kuwazono sat down on top of a tall boulder and gazed tensely at the northern forest from which the Seiran High team should be returning.
Eventually, the reluctant Iguchi and the two boys from Nagato Fisheries joined them there.
“Three minutes left,” murmured Nanakubo. “…Where the heck is that girl lazing around? Did she decide to play hooky again?”
The two Nagumo High second years assisting Nanakubo began to discuss their worries that an accident had happened. Nanakubo glanced at the two of them sidelong with a slightly pained gaze.
“…D-Did something… happen to them…?” murmured Kuwazono while trembling.
“No way!? Inari-senpai is with Hinooka-san. And Hinooka-san herself is oddly tenacious,” asserted Otomaru.
“…R-Right…”
Otomaru reassured the uneasy Kuwazono.
Soon after, voices called out to Otomaru and the others from behind.
It came from the circular beach where they’d first transported here. The outline of a small boat could be seen entering through the stone arch leading from the outer ocean into the cove and landing along the beach—
“What’s that? A sea kayak?”
“Isn’t that a canoe?”
One of the curious onlookers who gathered around shouted out.
“Wait… Isn’t that Hinooka-san and Inari-senpai…?”
Even upon catching sight of them from afar, Kuwazono was still uneasy.
“I-It’s them…? Where did they find that boat?” wondered Otomaru with wide eyes.
The two girls were indeed riding a kayak.
The kayak looked like the kind of leisure model that you could find on any beach at Iriomote Island, but it was wider in size and covered in cloth, obviously built to resist the head of waves.
Following Inari’s orders, the two of them immediately got off from the kayak.
Homura toppled over onto the beach. She used her paddle in place of a staff to stand back up.
The two girls walked up from the beach while pulling along the kayak in their hands.
Just when it looked like they were walking normally towards the goal point like that, they suddenly lifted up the kayak and put it over their heads for some reason. This time, Inari was standing in the lead.
The sight of a four-legged mysterious life form climbing the rocky hill was quite surreal.
“……Are they idiots?”
“Nana-senpai… The time…?”

As Nanakubo watched the two girls with a dumbfounded expression, Nagashino called her attention to the time.
“Ah, right.”
Nanakubo hurriedly checked the time and then immediately blew her whistle.
Preeeeeeeeeeeeeeet—
At the same time as the whistle was blown, the kayak arrived in front of the waiting club members.
After throwing the kayak onto the ground, the two girls collapsed on top of it and took gasping breaths with rapidly rising and descending chests.
“Hey, Homura… Why did we have to carry the boat all the way here!?” groaned Inari as she struggled to regain oxygen.
“…But… it brought us all the way here…”
Nanakubo held out her hand in front of Homura. Thinking Nanakubo was trying to help her up, Homura held out her own hand, but it was slapped away.
“Ah, right, the card…” Realizing Nanakubo was asking for their score card, Homura weakly handed it to her. “Nanakubo-senpai… did we make it in time?”
“You reached the goal at the very last minute in the most ridiculous and cliché way… It kinda pisses me off…”
Nanakubo grumbled while checking the point count on the card.
“We found this canoe? Kayak? Anyway, we found it along a river upstream. Inari-senpai said it was probably left behind by other investigators in the past.”
“That much is obvious without explanation! Next time, I’m definitely making sure that boats are forbidden.”
“My, oh my.”
As the other first years gathered around the kayak in curiosity, Nanakubo annoyingly shooed them away.
There had been several close calls, but all the participants had managed to safely finish the race, and now they all gathered around Nanakubo once more.
“Thanks for waiting. I will now announce the score results of the race—
“First, in third place, the Nagumo High team, Nagashino and Hiraoka! Score of ** points.
“Next, in second place, the Kanazawa Asano High team, Otomaru and Iguchi! Score of ** points.
“And… tied with time in second place is the Seiran High team, Inari and Hinooka! Even we upperclassmen didn’t expect anyone to travel downstream in a kayak. We had no idea that something like that was left behind on the island. Tch.”
“Eh, then… it’s against the rules?” asked Homura.

“We don’t mind if you guys use what’s on the island. We’ll forbid the use of boats starting next year’s race, though. Its presence makes it way too unfair for the other teams.”
“Yay! But second place, huh? No, this is quite an accomplishment in its own way, isn’t it?”
Homura scratched her head with a refreshed expression as Himekawa and Otomaru looked at her worriedly.
“What a shame, we didn’t make first place, Inari-senpai. But second place is good too, right?”
“That just makes all our hard work meaningless… Just what was the point of me coming…?”
Inari slumped in disappointment.
Next to her, Iguchi looked even more sorrowful and pitiful than Inari as she hung her head and smiled dully with tears in her eyes.
“Haha… It was all meaningless? Meaningless? All my desperate and brave struggles against the flabby and fidgety and wriggling things we encountered were meaningless? Ahaha, ha…”
While gazing pitifully at Iguchi’s despair, Nanakubo continued the rankings announcement.
“First place is the Hakozaki High team, Yoshi and Kirishima! Congratulations, well done you two. The remaining rankings will be written on the cards when we hand them back to you, so you can confirm it amongst yourselves.”
As the two Hakozaki High members were basked in applause, Yoshi nonchalantly began his victory speech.
“Thank you, thank you. We only managed to win by taking the lead while everyone else was struggling. The key to our victory was not restricting ourselves to our initially planned route and quickly giving up on checkpoints beyond our reach. Ah, but we decline the prize. Please give it to the second place team instead.”
“—Haah!? What!? You think we’ll accept that!?”
Nanakubo flew into a rage, feeling as if the hard work she and the others put into preparing this race was being ridiculed.
And it wasn’t just Nanakubo, the eliminated teams also shouted out “She’s right, she’s right!” in protest.
“Anyway, we’ll be giving the right to the prize over to Seiran High,” said Kirishima. “Hinooka, you saved Ishimi and Nagusa from Nagato Fisheries at the lagoon, right?”
The Hakozaki team’s proposal was quite impudent, but they wouldn’t budge on it.
“…Eh? Ah, yeah, I did. But—”
Homura was confused as the conversation suddenly turned to her. She crossed her open palms in an X in front of her chest.

“That has nothing to do with this race… Besides, even if I wasn’t there, the Wizard Oozore-senpai and Suou-senpai would have surely managed to save them regardless.”
Homura was flustered as all eyes now focused on her.
Nanakubo desperately tried to protest.
“You guys can’t do that. We won’t allow it! If you really want to forfeit your rights as the victor, then hand over the prize to second place in the proper order, idiot.”
Even as they were jabbed in the chest by Nanakubo, the two Hakozaki members crossed their arms and thought of a counterargument.
“Then, what about this?” Seeming to have thought of something, Yoshio obstinately raised his hand. “Please give five extra points to Seiran High for defeating the shark. That much is fair, right?”
“…Five extra points? You think I’ll let them come from behind and win like that? Seiran High and Kanazawa Asano High have an equal score, so Kanazawa Asano wins for arriving first.”
“That’s right. We got here first, so if anyone should be given the prize, it’s Kanazawa Asano, right!? Seiran was third place from the start! Nagumo High is fourth place! The way the rankings were calculated is wrong!” shouted Iguchi angrily.
Iguchi wouldn’t budge on the matter either, waiting to bring back victory as a gift to all her senpai no matter what.
Hearing the actual rankings declared so loudly like that made Nagashino become even more depressed.
Otomaru, who had been silently listening until now, finally spoke up.
“If it weren’t for that lagoon incident, we probably would have arrived last after them… And even without that, the Seiran team is incredible for being the only ones who went all the way to the end of the northern peninsula and made it back in time. That kind of feat is what the Exploration Club is really all about, isn’t it?”
“H-Hey, Omaru!” protested Iguchi.
“It really was difficult.” Homura nodded without the slightest trace of modesty.
“Hey, Homura? I’m the one who got the checkpoints at the peninsula, remember?” interjected Inari, no longer about to remain silent upon hearing that. “—So, what’s the verdict, Nana?”
“Stop with the ‘Nana, Nana’ already. Ah, geez… That’s it, I’ve had it! Just decide it through rock-paper-scissors!”
“Eeeeeeeeeh!?” After everyone present let out shouts of protest and resignation for a bit, the two teams in question gave up and agreed to do it.
“Win, Maru-kun! If you don’t, our future’s going to be dark when we get back!”
Otomaru balked at Iguchi’s pleading.
“What do you mean ‘dark’? Wait, I’m the one doing it? You’re handing all the responsibility to me even in a game of rock-paper-scissors?”

“Rock-paper-scissors, huh? Well, that kind of decision is just like Nana.” Inari seemed a bit happy for some reason. “Well, I’ll leave it to you,” she said as she gave Homura a push on the back.
“Eh?”
Thus, Otomaru and Homura came to stand in front of each other.
“Here we go! Rock, paper———”
The winner was Seiran High.
After that was decided, Nanakubo used the Transport Ring to bring herself and Homura back to Earth first.
There was no sign of anyone on the Ufara Beach in the pitch black of night.
Next, Nanakubo would head back to Nutella by herself and recover the other waiting club members.
By repeatedly transporting people in separate small groups between the two planets with one Transport Ring like this, they were able to make prior preparations on Nutella and send Oozore-senpai and Suou-senpai over when they came to inspect the race’s progress.
As the one entrusted with the top secret Transport Ring that was only known to Exploration Club Members, Nanakubo had to continuously use it to jump between worlds at regularly scheduled intervals according to the race’s progress and the time that correspondingly passed on Earth, so she was pretty tired and grumpy.
“—When you arrive at the meeting, ask for ‘karaoke in all the club buildings’. They’ll understand after hearing that coded message.”
“Eh, karaoke? Umm… Isn’t my club allowed one request with no veto?” asked Homura in confusion.
Irritated at being held back from returning to Nutella, Nanakubo replied to her impatiently.
“You obviously want to make a request about the Nutellan, right?”
“Y-Yeah.”
“In that case, don’t complain and go tell them the message I said! Hurry up and go, the club president meeting will end soon! Besides, if I don’t get back to the island soon, everyone’s going to start worrying, right!?”
“Yes, ma’am!”
Homura hurriedly turned to run towards the path that led back to the lodging house, but then Nanakubo was the one to call out and stop her on a whim.
“…Hinooka, thanks a lot.” Nanakubo grasped her hands together in a loop in front of her chest. “The last part was a complete fluke, but you did well. And you brought back Inari too.”
“……Yes!”
Nanakubo was making the pose for a single person transport. It was the first time Homura had seen it.
“But sorry, Nanakubo-senpai. Inari-senpai went to Nutella, but she doesn’t intend to return to the Exploration Club—”
“W-Wha…!? After doing all that…? Just how stubborn is that girl…?”

Nanakubo closed her eyes in deep concentration.
“Yeah, so you should tell her to come back too, Nana-senpai!”
“Enough with the Nana already…”
The Transport Ring on Nanakubo’s finger emitted a pulsing light, expanding until the light covered Nanakubo’s entire body, swimsuit and parka included.
The radiating light contracted and looked as if it was being absorbed into the ring until it was floating in the air by itself.
The next instant, the ring suddenly disappeared.
“…But thank you, senpai.”
Homura left the beach and hurried to the lodging house as the club president meeting was approaching its end.
“Phew—” Homura took a deep breath in front of the door to the meeting room.
She had spoken to the security clerk standing in front of the door and asked for permission to enter.
“……Uuh…”
She had hurried straight here from Nutella, but now that she took a good look at herself, her appearance was out of place and in shambles.
Her hair was still wet. Her feet were covered in sand. She had come without the time to take a shower, so she still reeked of salt water.
In the first place, she looked as if she’d just been out playing on the beach at night with a parka over her swimsuit, so what more needed to be said?
Eventually, Homura got permission to enter and was brought into the meeting room.
Within the large and wide room, there were two opposing long desks shaped in gentle arcs, and seated around them were the club presidents, vice-presidents and teaching advisors from every school.
“——”
All eyes in the room focused on Homura.
A projector was set up at the front of the room, and faint environmental sounds from nature could be heard from the speakers.
Kamikoma-senpai and Taga-senpai from Hiyoshizaka were present.
So were Inou from Tomakomai Denpa, Chigozuka from Ecchuu Takaoka, and Shiragiku from Kanazawa Asano.
Oozore-senpai and Suou-senpai, who’d Homura had met on Nutella earlier, were also seated at the tables with nonchalant expressions as if nothing had happened today.
And sitting at the front was Councillor Misasagi, with his arms silently crossed.
The Nagumo High advisor was glaring at Homura as if she were an intruder, along with several others in the room.
Unable to bear the tense atmosphere, Homura searched for the familiar faces from Seiran High.
…There…!

There they were. Touya, the provisional vice president of their club, Ameno, the representative(?) of Nutellan probe units, and Fujimori-sensei were sitting together. And lastly, Misasagi-senpai was staring back at Homura in surprise at her sudden entrance.
However, Misasagi-senpai's expression was quite different from Touya and Fujimori's annoyed looks at Homura.
"……"
Misasagi reflexively put her fingers to her slightly opened mouth and stared at Homura with widened eyes.
"—You said something about having a special proposal, newbie from Seiran?"
Tenryuu-senpai was the one to call out to Homura as she unconsciously stiffened where she stood.
"…Y-Yes! Umm! I-I'm Hinooka Homura, a first year at Seiran High! I apologize for interrupting in the middle of your meeting!"
Homura frantically bowed her head. Then, after taking a deep gulp, she said the message.
"I bring a request from all the first years. W-We'd like to have karaoke in the club buildings."
"Karaoke, is it? Very well, we'll consider it," Tenryuu replied nonchalantly.
"What? That's all you came here for?"
The Nagumo High advisor spoke in rough tone, but Tanakura-sensei from Hiyoshizaka gently soothed him by saying "Now, now".
Feeling so embarrassed she wanted to disappear right then and there, Homura then asked to be excused from the room.
But even so—
Homura didn't miss Misasagi-senpai's radiant and proud smile from where she sat next to Touya with his usual stunned expression. The other club presidents also slumped their shoulders, and an atmosphere of both resignation and relief filled the room.
Homura bowed several times more than necessary and was about to leave the room.
However, a voice called her to a halt.
"—Hey, wait."
The voice came from the speakers set up with the projector.
"Are you the Fire Girl?"
The person displayed by the projector, who Homura hadn't paid attention to until now, spoke to her.
The person spoke in slightly accented Japanese—but in real time.
Homura was completely taken aback, not having imagined that the screen was for a video conference.
"You're Miss Hinooka, correct?"
The person was a very intelligent-looking girl with blond hair and lightly tanned skin.

Homura was bewildered by the unrealistic first impression she had of her blue eyes, which seemed to sparkle.
“Hey, Chia, it’s here, right? She seems to be frozen, though.”
The person who replied to the name ‘Chia’ was Fujimori-sensei.
“That’s right, Miss Chandra. That’s her.”
Homura was annoyed by Fujimori’s casual and careless tone, but more importantly… the name Chandra rang a bell in Homura’s mind.
“Congratulations, Miss Hinooka. Nice to meet you, I’m Meivelle Srinivasa Chandra, the daughter of Anand Ajaib Chandra.”

Homura was confused by the sudden listing of such long names.
Chandra… Chandra… Dr. Chandra!
That name was deeply connected with the Exploration Club.
It referred to none other than Dr. Chandra, the scientist who discovered Nutella.
However, Homura hadn't known that Dr. Chandra had a young daughter.
Later, Homura would hear elsewhere that she was still only fourteen years old.
"I really would like to come congratulate you in person, but I'm in Beijing right now, so I apologize."
"Beijing… You're in China?" asked Homura.
"Yes. Your given name is Homura, correct? May I call you Homura?"
"Y-Yes, of course."
As Homura stood frozen in confusion, Tenryuu interjected from the side.
"Miss Chandra is, just as she appears, in her earlier teens. However, she's actually a UN representative inspector from UNPIEP headquarters. She's currently in China inspecting the investigator groups there. By the way, thanks for your hard work despite how much you must be bursting with the urge to play right now."
Meivelle's smiled turned cold as if she'd become an entirely different person.
"I don't deny that I'm young, but for some reason I feel unpleasant when I'm told that by you of all people, Tenryuu."
"Kukuku. Sorry about that. However, wouldn't it be ruder not to tease you for it?
"Why, how thoughtful of you. I still don't see the reason why you were made the Japanese investigator representative instead of Mister Oozore.
Meivelle glared harshly at Tenryuu, but then she shook it off and held out her hand towards the camera in the gesture for a handshake.
"I beg your pardon for that. Once again, congratulations, Homura. You are an infinitesimal kiss mark between two spheres brushing against each other."
"K-Kiss mark? W-What does that mean?"
"You've become a historic personage who initiated first contact with a Nutellan—"
"H-Historic…? I-In that case, there are two of us."
"Two?" repeated Meivelle.
"Me and Touya-kun over there. We encountered Subaru-hime on Nutella together."
Homura turned towards Touya, who had been frowning worriedly since the conversation started. Homura's expression was slightly proud.
"My, I apologize," said Meivelle with her hand over her mouth in surprise.
"Forgive me for the mistake. Then I'll say it once more. Congratulations, Mister Touya. Please remember that I'm not the only one who was deeply

glad that you returned to Earth safely. I pray for the good luck you two are blessed with to carry on into the future—”
Homura shrugged bashfully.
“Y-Yes… Thank you very much.”
Touya also stood up from his seat and bowed deeply to Meivelle.
“Thank you very much, Miss Chandra. It’s an honor.”
Misasagi and Ameno smiled proudly at their fellow club members. However, Fujimori alone was waving her hand frantically at Homura in a shooing gesture and trying to chase her out of the room as quickly as possible. Naturally, Homura pretended not to see her gesturing.
“Eh~… W-When you say good luck~…”
“Yes?” The tanned skin titled her head with a good-natured smile at Homura’s bashful fidgeting.
“Exactly… what level of good luck do you mean…? Like, as amazingly lucky as opening a Pino[3] box and finding it filled with all star-shaped Pinos?”
“—Pino?” Meivelle widened her blue eyes in confusion. “What’s a Pino? But, I see, though it depends on the definition of ‘star-shaped’, if the two objects in question are star-shaped instead of round and spherical, then they can touch at two separate points in the shortest possible distance.”
Meivelle wore a child-like puzzled expression that suited her age. Homura added more upon realizing something.
“Wait, you don’t have Pinos in India!? Is it because the heat there makes them melt? Anyway, Pinos are—”
“Yes! Yes, you can leave now! Thank you for delivering the message!” shouted Fujimori as she ran over to Homura.
“Eh~~?”
Having reached her limit in tolerating this deviation from the meeting, Fujimori grabbed Homura’s arm and dragged her out of the meeting room. When she peeked back into the room as she was reluctantly dragged away, she saw Ameno tenaciously picking up after Homura and explaining about Pinos.”
“Pinos are 10% milk solids-not-fat and 8% butterfat, and they mainly contain lipids and abundant calcium…”
Chapter 9 END

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) The Japanese word for “meek/obedient” is “Sunao”, which is also Inari’s first name, hence the obvious pun by Homura here.

(2) In Japan, people often make promises by grabbing each other’s pinky fingers together.

(3) Pino: a brand of small chocolate covered ice cream snacks in packets of six that is popular in Japan. They come in various shapes and flavors, and the star-shaped ones are considered rare and lucky, especially if all six in a single box are star-shaped.

Chapter 10

The next day marked the second day of the SA.
The sky above Iriomote Island was also clear today as Homura and the others boarded a boat.
The twin-hulled catamaran ship, which resembled two boats connected by a single deck, was quite comfortable to ride despite its slow speed.
It was currently headed to a very small uninhabited island. Apparently, the entire island was made from accumulated coral shells.
This mini-tour was part of the oceanographic workshop that Homura had chosen from the many SA programs, since it was advertised as being low difficulty and geared towards first years. Moreover, the person in charge of it was someone she knew, the advisor for the Hiyoshizaka Exploration Club, Tanakura-sensei.
For those reasons, most of the participants heading to the uninhabited island were first years, including Ishimi and Nagusa from Nagato Fisheries who she'd competed against in the race just last night.
Touya, Ameno and Misasagi-senpai had also come along.
Misasagi was currently talking with a third year boy from Hiyoshizaka, Momoyama Masami.
It looked like the two of them were the only third years on the boat.
Momoyama-senpai wasn't normally seen talking that much, but he seemed very happy as he conversed with Misasagi.
Touya spoke to Homura in a low voice so as not to be heard by the two senpai.
"—So Inari headed home by boat first thing in the morning?"
"Hrmm?"
Homura lifted her head while blinking blearily, having been on the verge of dozing off on a bench.
"…Yeah, she did." Homura nodded despondently. "I managed to make her stay the night with Himekawa-san's help, though."
Last night, Himekawa Shizune had intruded on the Seiran girls' room just as promised.
Homura's current drowsiness was less due to exhaustion from yesterday's race and more from lack of sleep after having chatted with Himekawa and Ameno long into the night.
But even in that sleep-deprived state, Homura had noticed when Inari got out of bed before everyone else and began to dress herself, so she'd tried to stop Inari from immediately departing.
"Trying to pin someone who can wrestle with a polar bear was impossible for me…"
"What exactly were you doing early this morning…?"

“Fujimori-senpai came back to the room dead drunk and wasn’t any help at all.”
Again?[1]
“Ah,” stated Touya, roughly deducing what happened. “But don’t the teachers sleep in separate rooms? Her bad habit must have acted up again. She did the same thing when we gathered to prepare the materials for the presentation the day before yesterday.”
Homura sighed, easily able to believe that scenario.
Touya meekly asked another question.
“Did Inari talk with Misasagi-senpai a bit? They slept in the same room, right?”
“Well… the thing is…”
Misasagi and Inari had each placed their futons on opposite ends of the room, and they had refused to close the gap between them, always speaking through Homura as an intermediary for any requests like changing the temperature of the air conditioning or picking up some snacks outside of their reach. Homura had ended up being a middleman even for conversations like the following:
“Will the weather be clear tomorrow, Homura?”
“…Who knows? I didn’t have the time to check the weather report.”
“It doesn’t look like there’s any signs of hurricanes during the SA, Hinooka-san.”
“…It looks like it’ll be clear weather.”
While Homura had been stuck fighting alone, Fujimori had been collapsed on the ground snoring loudly, no help at all.
Meanwhile, Himekawa had been excitedly conversing with Ameno with blushing cheeks, her accent slipping out… kinda. The way her voice and expression had remained dispassionate throughout it all had been quite off-putting.
“I see. That sounds like a scene straight out of hell.” Touya crossed his arms and nodded. “So in the end, senpai and Inari didn’t say a single word to each other. Sorry for not being there, but it’s the girls’ room, after all.”
“I felt embarrassed having Himekawa-san witness the true state of our club…”
“…Yeah… Wait, no, I don’t think that’s true. The mood and atmosphere of the room might have been weird, sure, but I’m positive that it ended up being a good memory for Himekawa.”
“Is that how it is?”
“That’s how it is,” Touya declared confidently. He himself was staying in the Hiyoshizaka boys’ room during the SA.
“—Really?”
Had something memorable happened in the boys’ room perhaps? That was an unusually suggestive comment for him.
Thinking back, Hiyoshizaka truly had members that seemed suitable for the Exploration Club, which made Homura feel a bit envious. Even though she

knew that there was no point in wishing for something you didn't have, she couldn't help comparing the two clubs since they were paired schools.
They're really well-balanced as a group… Are they aiming for the high score as the best club or something…?
The club president Kamikoma radiated leadership despite her small stature. The vice president Taga was an unquestionable powerhouse.
Homura had also heard that the carefree Hayashi-senpai was actually skilled at the bow. She disliked his overly jesting manner, but he was really easy to talk to and seemed like he'd be reliable on Nutella.
As for the first years, Saho Akiho was a frivolous guy, but he was also amiable and fun to be around. Kanae Yuri, however, was still a mystery.
As for Momoyama-senpai, Homura still didn't know much about him besides his seemingly quiet and docile demeanor.
Still, just observing everyone from the side like this was enough for her to sense the intimate atmosphere among the upperclassmen like Misasagi and Kamikoma. Inari should have been in that intimate circle as well in the past.
Yet, when she looked back on her own Seiran club—
No, no, no…
Homura cut off those negative thoughts which didn't suit the emerald green sea spread out before her and instead turned to ask a question of her own to Touya.
"Hey, Touya-kun. How was that panel you attended this morning? What was it, 'Fierce Final Battle On The Southern Seas'?"
"No, you got the name completely wrong."
Its proper name was the 'Panel On Exploring Countermeasure Tools Against Large Nutellan Beasts'.
It was a gathering organized by the Equipment Division, which developed the survival tools used by the Exploration Club.
The Equipment Division was responsible for the special-made swords that Touya used for his two-sword style, and Homura was also indebted to them for constantly improving the Nutella-use anti-bear spray that Homura had relied on greatly before.
Touya had enjoyed that panel especially among the many programs in this year's SA.
"It sounds like it was fun. Touya-kun, you like gadgets like those, right?"
"Yeah, I'm glad I went." Touya nodded in satisfaction. "I didn't expect to see the scuffle between Taga-senpai and Tenryuu-senpai there either."
"That kind of thing happened…!? Between Taga-senpai and Tenryuu-senpai?"
"They said that we wouldn't fully understand without a proper demonstration. Taga-senpai played the role of a bear and Tenryuu-senpai faced him with an elastic spear that had a special rubber and wire net attached at the tip."
"Hoho… That sounds like quite the story…" Homura had trouble imagining it herself. "It must have been quite the sight to see. But, even if it was just

acting, to think he would fight Taga-senpai… Does Tenryuu-senpai practice some kind of martial arts?”
“You don’t know? No, I guess most people normally wouldn’t. He doesn’t participate in official matches, after all. Tenryuu-senpai comes from the lineage that originally created the Shinkage style[2]. Though he’s not a direct descendent.”
“What?”
Homura glanced at Misasagi-senpai, and then looked back at Touya.
“Touya-kun, you lose in every aspect.”
“Shut up,” retorted Touya with a complicated expression. “Well, anyway, the panel was nowhere near long enough to be fully satisfying with only three hours to listen and learn. How about you? You went, right? To the mage class discussion.”
Homura instantly slumped depressingly at those words.
“…Not a single thing… I couldn’t understand a single thing they said… A gathering of great mages was too high level for me…”
Homura dramatically sobbed with her hands covering her face.
Even during the presentations by each school which had been simplified for ordinary investigators, she’d barely been able to follow the content on magic. In a gathering where all limiters were off in a discussion between fellow mages, Homura, who openly acknowledged that she was even more inexperienced than a mage trainee, felt like she was a tortoise surrounded by incomprehensible fairies.
“What’s with those people~? They didn’t sound like high schoolers at all. What the heck is a mo…mo…mock data function? What is a monster army? They’re the ones who are monsters…”
This time even Touya couldn’t help expressing sympathy for her.
“Well, it can’t be helped. There are several regular competitors in the Mathematics Olympics present here at the SA. But still, did you manage to get anything out of the panel?”
“This… They awarded it to everyone who participated in the panel.”
Homura perused through the tote bag on her knees and took out a pure white cube.
“A Rubik’s cube? But it has no colors. How do you use it?”
“Try it out yourself.”
Touya took the white cube from Homura and immediately understood.
“Ah—I see—Braille, huh?”
The cube had Braille characters etched across its surface, originally being a puzzle for those with impaired sight. Of course, Homura and Touya were also capable of playing with it by relying on their fingers’ sense of touch. This cube had been further modified for the Exploration Club, emitting electronic sounds when it was configured in specific patterns.
“Apparently, by practicing with this cube using only touch and hearing, it helps better form a Rubik’s model in your mind on Nutella too… or so I was told.”

“Hmm, that’s an interesting exercise. So you’re going to start doing intensive training with this, right?”
“Gugh… Just what kind of club did I join?”
Before long, the catamaran boat reached the coral reef island.
Homura and the other Exploration club members all disembarked on the island.
Just as the rumors said, it was a long and narrow island of fifty meters in length that resembled nothing more than a sandbar sticking out of the ocean.
There was a beauty in that simple scenery, but it was also quite difficult to walk on it.
“This island is pretty, but it’s better not to take off your beach shoes here,” explained Tanakura-sensei while wiping the glossy sweat on his face.
Since this was hardly the place for his usual white coat, he was instead wearing a Hawaiian shirt patterned with Indian coral trees.
When several female students hesitantly held parasols in their hands, Tanakura urged them to go ahead and set them up along the beach.
“The sun really is bright here. Truthfully, we could have conducted this program in a classroom, but since we went to the trouble of coming all the way to Iriomote Island, I thought this way would be better. If we have some time left over, you guys can even go swimming a bit.”
Naturally, everyone present was wearing swimsuits under their clothes.
While most wore excited expressions at the prospect, Ishimi and Nagusa from Nagato Fisheries earnestly shook their heads with expressions that screamed ‘No way!’. Ameno, who had gone to stand next to the two of them at some point, had her arms full with tools for observing the ocean in its natural state.
Either way, they fully intend to go into the ocean later… Geez, doing something uncalled-for like that… Homura looked at the three of them with a smile.
Then, with no proper introduction, Tanakura began the lecture.
“—Have you ever heard about how no fossils have ever been found on Nutella? You’ve never heard any news of Nutellan dinosaur or ammonite fossils, right? This is true, but in a certain sense, it’s very odd.”
Tanakura took out a white cylinder the size of an index finger from his breast pocket.
“This is a piece of blackboard chalk… But perhaps there are some people here who don’t know what it is—Ah, you all do? Good.”
After anxiously looking over the gathered students, Tanakura patted his chest in relief.
“Right, this is a piece of chalk. This was used to write on blackboards before electronic blackboards were introduced in every school. The chalk that was mainly used in Japan was mostly made of limestone; in other words, calcium carbonate. And speaking of limestone—”
Tanakura’s gaze swept across the island they were on.

“The entire Okinawan Prefecture is situated over a geological layer known as Ryuukyuu[3] limestone. This layer is formed from the accumulation of coral on the ocean floor, like this island here. However, the proper meaning of ‘chalk’ is a bit different than the common use of the word.”
Tanakura showed them the piece of blackboard chalk in his hand again.
“The English word ‘chalk’ normally refers to this kind of blackboard chalk too, but its proper meaning refers to the mineral ‘chalk’ itself, as in the chalk from the Cretaceous Period. The famous pure white cliffs along the Strait of Dover in England contain huge reserves of it. This piece of chalk was made in England with chalk mined there.”
Tanakura took out a medical-use computer tablet that he had brought along. Its screen was a bit larger than the kind usually used in schools.
“This is a photo of this piece of chalk magnified under a microscope.”
Tanakura held the tablet in front of his chest and showed it to the gathered students with an expectant smile.
“……”
“……Huh?”
But there was no reaction.
The students were all staring at Tanakura with half-closed eyes.
“…Ah… Is the surrounding sunlight perhaps too bright for you to see the screen?”
All the students nodded.
“Sorry, sorry. Then, could you please come closer? And could the people over there lend me one of your parasols for shade? Man, I should have brought printouts.”
Thus, Tanakura-sensei kneeled on the ground and all the first years approached and kneeled down as well to peer at the tablet’s screen.
Some of them let out exclamations of surprise.
Though hesitating at the sensation of pain from the coral scratching against her knees, Homura also tried to get into the circle around the tablet. But when she abruptly looked back, she saw that Misasagi and Momoyama were sitting down on a husk of coral towards the rear of the crowd and quietly watching over the bustling of the first years.
Misasagi-senpai’s eyes happened to meet Homura’s, and she smiled at her.
Meanwhile, Momoyama squirmed uneasily as he sat next to Misasagi with very little space between them.
Haha… Touya-kun has it tough, thought Homura with some sympathy. At the same time, she finally managed to get a peek at Tanakura’s tablet.
—Ugh.
Having carelessly let her guard down, Homura flinched upon seeing the image on the screen.
The image showed countless ring-shaped objects. Their appearance varied between twisted washers and car wheels, overlapping with each other to form several spheres.

It was completely different from the simple mineral photo Homura had expected. It looked organic and alive like a virus, causing instinctual, visceral disgust in those who saw it.
After waiting for everyone to get a look at it, Tanakura resumed his lecture.
“Doesn’t it look cute? …It doesn’t? These are coccoliths, a species of plankton which possesses a calcareous husk. Around the Strait of Dover, there’s a layer of these coccoliths that have accumulated over several hundreds of thousands of years. So the white cliffs of Dover are actually made from gigantic lumps of fossils.”
The fact that extremely microscopic things like plankton had accumulated to form the contours of the British Isle was the kind of knowledge that almost made one want to cry.
“The club members from Hakozaki High probably already know this, but this is the true source of the white tide that occurs in Hakata Bay.”
“Aaaah,” several Hakozaki club members exclaimed in clear annoyance. Their appreciation of the lecture on chalk had instantly plummeted.
“Naturally, there should be accumulated coccolith layers like this on Nutella too. In order to confirm this, geological surveys have been performed there.”
“Have any been found there?” someone asked.
Tanakura nonchalantly nodded.
“Yes, we’ve gradually begun to find them on Nutella—But wait, that contradicts what I just said about how no fossils have yet to be found on Nutella, right? —So, look at this. This is a piece of Nutellan chalk.”
Tanakura took out another piece of chalk.
“Heeh,” some students exclaimed in interest.
“The person who collected the limestone on Nutella to make this was Momoyama-kun over there. Thank you very much for that.”
The gazes of all the first years turned to Momoyama in admiration.
“There was no need to actually make a piece of chalk out of it…” said Momoyama with a bashful smile.
“But you were quite eager about it yourself, Momoyama-kun. This is one of the very few pieces of Nutellan chalk on Earth right now. It’s quite rare and valuable. Here, take a look yourselves.”
Tanakura passed around the piece of chalk, which was wrapped in green tape to differentiate it from normal chalk, to the students in front of him, along with the regular piece of chalk he’d shown them earlier and a small blackboard to try them out on.
Several students had never handled chalk before and looked at them curiously.
In Homura’s eyes, chalk was an antique item, but she had sometimes in the past seen it on signboards in stylish cafés and had used it herself to scribble.
The piece of Nutellan chalk, which was handed around to each student in turns, looked no different from regular chalk.

“It looks normal.”
“Yeah. Though it does seem rare and valuable when you hear that there are very few of them on Earth.”
Touya and Homura weren’t particularly moved or excited by it.
When they tried comparing the two chalks on the boards, the sensation of writing with the Nutellan one was slightly different. But it was doubtful how reliably they could compare them in such a humid place next to the sea.
Ishimi raised his hand and asked a question.
“Is this also made of coccolith? From fossils of Nutellan lifeforms?”
As if having waited for that very question, Tanakura took out his tablet again with a meek expression.
“……”
Everyone gathered around him again.
Tanakura spoke in a low and ghastly tone, as if he was starting to tell a ghost story.
“This is an enlarged picture of this chalk.”
“……”
Displayed on the screen was an image completely different from the earlier picture of coccolith from England.
“Is this… really plankton?”
“This isn’t CG or something?”
Finally excited a little, several students voiced comments and impressions.
It was completely different from the earlier image of twisted washer-shaped coccoliths. Objects shaped like cylinders, donuts and polygonal pillars lay heaped on top of one another. It was like peering into a box of building blocks.
This actually looked close to the mineral-like image that Homura had first imagined.
“…That’s right. It looks like primitive cubes from CG. However, this is a real, unaltered photograph. Though of course, it was only photographed after the samples were brought back to Earth—”
Is this due to a difference in the performance of the cameras? No, it’s more than that… Homura tilted her head in confusion. As everyone else was most likely thinking similar questions, Tanakura resumed lecturing.
“—Unfortunately, we still don’t know whether this is really plankton or not. It might not be from a lifeform at all. However, there have been countless cases of seeing such geometric patterns in both organic and inorganic objects on both the micro- and macroscopic scale on Earth too.”
Tanakura cited some famous and lesser-known examples such as naturally-formed crystals, beehives, certain germs, snowflakes, clods of Bismuth ore which formed complex and maze-like shapes, geological columnar jointing in Armenia, and Northern Ireland’s Giant’s Causeway where naturally-forming hexagonal stone columns lay stacked together along the coast.
“There also exist minerals like this.”

Next, Tanakura took out a crystal of a mineral known as pyrite. Its shape could only be described as two dice cubes merged together. The crystal was extremely geometric in shape, just like the earlier image that resembled a box of building blocks, and was similarly naturally formed as well.
That's... a 'Dodeca-model'!?
A Dodeca-model—one of the most common geometric models used for magic, which specialized in musical scale reproduction.
Homura briefly held the dodecahedron-shaped pyrite, formed with faces of regular pentagons, as it was passed around. She couldn't believe something shaped so precisely and elaborately was really made by nature.
Tanakura next held out the photos of the Nutellan and Earth chalks side by side for everyone to see.
"If I saw these two photos for the first time, I would probably instinctively believe that the one that resembled a geometrical mineral was used as the raw material for blackboard chalk."
That was the same initial impression that Homura had.
After that, Tanakura went to compare nature and its working on both Nutella and Earth.
There were still many wonders hidden on Earth that surpassed mysteries on Nutella, and even if something was discovered on Nutella, it would be hasty to assume that it was unique to Nutella. His lecture delved into such interesting topics, but eventually the lecture came to an end and the students were given free time to play and relax on the island.
Most of the first years merrily jumped into the sea.
After being set free, they all instantly became typical beach-goers, and several of them invited Homura to come play with them, but she obstinately declined with words like "No, I'm fine", "I'm good here" and "Don't mind me". Touya was still talking further with Tanakura. Ameno, Ishimi and Nagusa went off to pick up armfuls of sea cucumbers and came back excitedly to show them off to Homura.
Wearing a baggy tunic and hat, Homura sat down on the island and gazed out at the sea.
"You're not, going to, swim?"
Misasagi-senpai spoke up to Homura upon catching sight of her sitting there listlessly.
"No… I just prefer to play on the beach at night… I guess."
Homura spoke evasively with an uncertain smile.
Unperturbed by Homura's attitude, Misasagi sat down with her hands wrapped around her knees and hung her head slightly.
"Thank you, Hinooka-san."
Homura turned to look at her in surprise, and Misasagi explained further.
"For what, you did, yesterday…"
"Ah……"

Of course, Homura hadn’t forgotten about the race and the events on the uninhabited Nutellan island last night, but Nanakubo had declared a strict gag order on talking about the race.
The other first years who participated like Ishimi and Nagusa were also acting as if nothing had happened. Similarly, thoughts about it had fallen to the back of Homura’s mind.
“No, I’m just happy… that I was able to be of use to you in some way.”
“…Thanks.”
As for Touya, he had laughed and teasingly asked “Was that supposed to be some kind of penalty game?” to Homura after her sudden appearance in the club president meeting last night.
Apparently though, after Homura appeared in the meeting, the previously rocky discussion progressed much more smoothly. And the most concerning issue, the establishment and running of a base camp near Subaru-hime’s castle on Nutella, was agreed on to be spearheaded by Seiran and Hiyoshizaka High.
Touya should eventually notice from the unspoken mood among the other first years that something had happened, but it seemed he had yet to pick up on it.
However, Homura had come to notice and suspect something of her own.
“Umm, Senpai… Did you come with us here because it was difficult being around the other upperclassmen? Because of what I did…”
“No, that’s not, it.”
Misasagi exaggeratedly waved her hands.
“Everyone has, their respective positions, in the meeting—and they become stern, and harsh due to, the responsibilities, they carry, but normally, they’re all, very kind and, fun people. They still, candidly approach, and talk with me, even after, the meeting.”
“Really? Really, really? Thank goodness…”
Misasagi repeatedly nodded to reassure Homura.
Homura patted her chest in relief as the worry that had been constantly plaguing her disappeared.
Misasagi’s expression turned serious again.
“I came on, this outing because, I wanted to, thank you, Hinooka-san.”
“Senpai……”
Hearing senpai’s heartfelt gratitude truly made Homura so happy she could cry.
However, there was still another important matter that weighed on her mind.
“Hey, senpai. Please tell that to Inari-senpai as well.”
“……”
Misasagi should have already guessed that Inari had participated in the race.
After all, she was aware that Homura didn’t have the skill to complete a race on an uninhabited island all by herself.

“I really like you, Misasagi-senpai, but I—” Homura’s face turned red at her own words. “—I also like Inari-senpai. I had trouble dealing with her at first, but I’ve come to like and respect her. So I think it’d be great if the two of you could make up with each other. Touya-kun is seriously hoping for that too, you know?”
Misasagi didn’t reply, merely hanging her head with a pained expression. Even so, Homura couldn’t stop herself from speaking, not after she’d seen all the hard work Inari Sunao had done for their Exploration Club and how much she had exerted herself for the sake of her best friend, *Mayo*.
“…Fujimori-sensei said that we shouldn’t interfere since it’s a problem between the two of you, but… this is no longer just your problem. Because we all—”
“…I’m, sorry, Hinooka-san.”
“Can you at least tell me what happened? Touya and I can’t understand unless we hear the reason from your own mouth, senpai…”
“You’re, right… I’ll tell you, the whole story. But could you, wait a, little while?”
“Sure.”
After agreeing to Misasagi’s request, Homura then shivered under the sunlight.
“What’s, wrong…?”
“Umm, the thing is… I’ve gone over my limit of being subjected to continuous serious talk…”
Homura self-deprecatingly laughed a little while pressing her cheeks, which had gone numb from the tension, with both hands.
The shaky, nearly tearful smile that Misasagi wore at that moment left a deep impression on Homura.
The night of the last day of the SA.
A buffet-style party was held in the lodging house as a last friendly get-together among the Exploration Club members.
Naturally, the club members all wore the uniforms from their high schools. The female club presidents were dressed up showily.
The male club presidents didn’t get to wear full-blown tuxedos, but they each wore some form of formal attire.
Tenryuu-senpai, for instance, wore a traditional haori-hakama[4].
The dishes on the tables didn’t have anything fancy like hors d’oeuvres from a fancy hotel, but the food was extravagant enough to satisfy high schoolers with healthy appetites.
What especially stood out was the large boiled fish that was caught locally. Beside the plate was a card that displayed the name of the fish: coral trout, an Okinawan specialty. It was famous as a high-class and very delicious fish. Moreover, the card said that it had been caught by Tenryuu-senpai. Just when had he found the time to go off and catch it—?
The coral trout looked splendid as it lay stretched out on the plate emitting a tantalizing scent, but it looked so impressive that no one had the courage

to reach for it first. Everyone seemed to be warily gauging each other's distance to the trout, but the one who first reached out her chopsticks to it in a nonchalant manner was Fujimori-sensei. After that, it was quickly reduced to bone in the blink of an eye as if attacked by a horde of piranhas.
Misasagi-senpai was wearing a gorgeous light blue dinner gown for this banquet that Homura had helped her to put on. Homura had been worried that the knee-length skirt with see-through lace on certain sections and the gown's design which greatly exposed her back was a bit too bold, but Misasagi-senpai was apparently used to banquets like this and easily wore the gown without being self-conscious.
Misasagi had been eager about it, saying that she didn't want to lose to the other club presidents, but it was already her complete victory as far as Homura was concerned, easily surpassing Homura's mental image of a well-dressed Edo-period town magistrate. In fact, she almost appeared to have held back by limiting herself to a gown with a girlish-length skirt.
But what reassured Homura the most was how the club presidents and upperclassmen from other schools gathered around Misasagi-senpai and chatted with her. In complete reversal to the sharp words they'd used during the SA, they were all talking together like normal high schoolers now. The mood among them was so harmonious that Homura even felt a little alienated.
Meanwhile, Homura went with the flow and passed around various circles of people as she was invited to talk with them.
The faces she conversed with changed one after another, and just when she was getting a little tired from the energetic atmosphere, she caught sight of movement in a corner of the banquet hall.
A third year girl stepped onto the stage while escorted by Oozore.
She wore a slender evening dress. She was Furumachi, the club president of the Tazatani High Exploration Club.
She was a dazzling beauty that had caught Homura's eye during both the school presentations and the club president meeting Homura had intruded upon. If Misasagi-senpai could be compared to a flower blooming on a high plateau, Furumachi-senpai was a graceful bird standing along a clear, rippling waterside.
She had an adult air that you wouldn't expect from a high schooler.
It would be much later that Homura learned Furumachi's nickname 'Songbird[5]' and her reputation as an outstandingly clever woman who possessed both the mage and bard class and who had mastered several rhythm spells.
Since earlier, there had been several club members performing some live BGM that suited the mood of the banquet. Furumachi went to stand in front of the stage mic, and all the bard-class members present including Kamikoma-senpai rushed over to stand behind her with their individual instruments to serve as musical accompaniment as Furumachi began to sing.

She sang the Okinawan folk song “Flowers of the Garden Balsam”—it was the perfect song for enhancing the travelling mood of this small trip with its foreign tone.
It was refreshing to hear local Okinawan music performed by instruments besides a sanshin[6], and the combination of both Kamikoma-senpai’s lute and the harmonic unison of the stringed instruments of the other bards sounded so movingly beautiful that it felt like it would never be heard again.
The fervent atmosphere within the banquet hall, which had been so heated that it rendered the moderate air-conditioning in the room useless, had now turned quiet and gentle.
……
Though it felt like a bit of a waste to do so, Homura quietly left the banquet hall on her own while all eyes were focused on the stage.
She wanted to sort out her feelings a little—
Her eyes happened to meet with Fujimori-sensei’s as she was leaning against the wall of the corridor just outside the hall and talking with Tanakura, but she didn’t rebuke Homura for her departure. As Homura passed by, Fujimori merely grumbled out loud, “I can’t believe the party’s gotten so roused up without any beer being served.”
Outside the lodging house, Homura caught sight of the two former reserve members who had just established their own Exploration Club.
If she remembered right, the boy was Kazuma from Sendai Aoba High, and the girl was Fukuda from Ishinomaki Kanan High. They were both upperclassmen.
Homura’s appraisal was perhaps a bit questionable, but the two of them seemed to have a good atmosphere going between them from what Homura could see, so she went away so as not to intrude. Following the foot lights that bordered the garden, she ended up in the garden adjoining the lodging house.
She found a place along a sloped lawn beneath one of the lodging house’s terraces, from which she could see the sea of stars slightly between the tree branches above.
Excited at having found such a nice and refreshing place, Homura walked over to the slope.
But then—
……!
Someone wearing a school uniform was lying on the slope in the darkness.
It was a barefoot girl. Her white legs were exposed and stretched out on the ground where she lay.
Her leather shoes were thrown to the side and rolled away in a clutter next to the boy beside her.
Oh my, a crime, Homura couldn’t help but initially think as her eyes were glued to the scene.
—It was Hayashi and Kanae Yuri.

They were, of course, familiar faces to Homura, but she sensed the serious mood between them, so Homura reflexively quieted her breathing and hid in the shadow of the building.
Kanae and Hayashi didn't seem to have noticed Homura's presence as they lay on the ground amidst the sound of the waves in the night and the lingering heat from the day.
Hayashi's shoulder was practically touching Kanae's languidly stretched out arm.
Kanae poked his shoulder with a slender twig she held in her hand.
Poke…*Poke*……*Poke*…
Each time she poked the twig with a lot of pressure, the twig bent and shortened until she pulled it back and then persistently poked him again.
It should have been quite painful for Hayashi. He was even bleeding a little.
But he didn't say anything as he let her poke him.
……Kanae-san…?
Homura wavered between leaving right away or appearing before the two of them and shouting 'Sorry for intruding!', but she lost the timing to do so, and she couldn't hold back her curiosity, so Homura ended up remaining in the shadows watching them.
Kanae finally seemed to get bored of playing with the twig, and then…
"—Ouch."
The one who finally murmured that wasn't Hayashi but Kanae.
Hayashi lifted his head a little from where he lay beside her.
"I have some medicinal ointment."
"Apply it on me."
"Do it yourself."
Showing no sign of obeying Hayashi's words, Kanae merely lifted her upper body from the grass.
She held herself up with her hands on the grass and silently opened her mouth with her eyes closed.
With a small sigh, Hayashi moved to sit closer beside Kanae and pushed her hair back to her nape to peer at her mouth.
"It's too dark for me to see anything."
"……"
Kanae silently pointed at her cheeks.
Appearing to understand the silent message, Hayashi took out his ointment and seemed to rub it on the inside of her cheeks. Homura couldn't quite see from where she was. The only thing she could tell was that their faces were very close to each other.
And the whole time, the girl, Kanae, just lay there motionlessly, like a high class queen or even a lifeless doll.
Wh…at…? What is… this? What the heck are the two of them doing?
At this point, Homura could only desperately hold her breath as she watched.

After the ointment was finished being applied, Kanae lay back down on the grass and mumbled.
“Bitter…”
“It’s embarrassing to have a mouth ulcer at your age. You shouldn’t eat pastries all the time.”
“……”
Hayashi rebuked Kanae, who didn’t say anything in response.
However, she was clearly irritated.
“Your lips are rough and worn too. You should take proper care of yourself. You really have no self-awareness as a girl, Yuri.”
She was being one-sidedly lectured.
That’s not true at all! Homura wanted to shout that out, but the mood between the two of them wasn’t one that she could intrude upon, and she didn’t have the courage or right to do so either.
Kanae turned over as if tossing in her sleep and murmured with her back facing Hayashi.
“I just wish this whole thing would quickly end. This place is hot and humid, and Okinawan cuisine isn’t tasty at all.”
“I find it quite fun here, personally.”
“……Liar.”
Kanae spit out those words, speaking as if she had seen through him.
“You’re just playing along with the fun atmosphere here. Deep down, you don’t find it fun at all, Ryou. You’re always like that.”
“……”
This time Hayashi was the one to turn silent.
“…I really want to hurry up and go home.”
Kanae brought her knees to her chest and curled up on the ground.
Hayashi spoke up as he watched her from the side.
“Are you angry about those instructions?”
Hayashi asked the question in an unusually serious tone.
After a long silence, Kanae responded with a murmur.
“I… hate it. Having to help *that person*…”
“……”
…Who was ‘that person’?
Homura didn’t know what they were talking about.
But those two seemed be to be tormented by something huge… From Homura’s perspective, they were slightly odd yet smart and jaunty, but at that moment, they both seemed so frail it unsettled Homura.
“Hey, people are calling for you, Homura-san.”
In that instant, Homura felt as if her heart leapt out of her throat.
Homura turned around to find Ameno standing behind her.
“Everyone wants you and the rest of our club to give handwritten letters over to Subaru-hime… Wait, why are you in a place like this?
“M-My skin was feeling a bit prickly from sunburn…” said Homura as a lame excuse.

Ameno peered over Homura’s shoulder at the garden along the lodging’s house.
“—My, my, is that Hayashi-san… and Yuri-san?”
“L-Let’s head back, Ame-chan.”
“Ah, sure.”
Homura pushed Ameno’s back and at her urging they both returned to the banquet hall.
Most likely, Kanae and Hayashi had overheard her conversation with Ameno.
While plagued by embarrassment and guilt, Homura rejoined the banquet.
—That was the last notable memory Homura experienced during the SA.
The next day, they all returned home.
On the flight to Haneda airport, Homura’s club once again rode the same airplane as the members from Hiyoshizaka High, but Kanae and Hayashi wore unconcerned expressions and didn’t show any particular reaction when they faced Homura—
Or rather, there was no real opportunity to confront them, as the two of them spent most of the flight fast asleep, and Homura also dozed off as she was attacked by exhaustion and drowsiness on the plane along with Touya beside her.
Chapter 10 END

aren't you going to swim?
ugh... later, okay?
the UV rays...

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

(1) This is another case of the narrator making a comment.

(2) The Shinkage (meaning “new shadow”) style is a traditional school of Japanese martial arts, which primarily focuses on swordsmanship.

(3) Ryuukyuu: a chain of southwestern Japanese islands comprising Okinawa Prefecture.

(4) Haori-hakama: a traditional form of Japanese male formal attire with a coat and divided skirt.

(5) In Japanese, the English word “bird” is spelled and pronounced the same way as “bard”. This is likely a purposeful double meaning in this nickname, but for the sake of convenience, I’ll be sticking to “Songbird” in the translation.

(6) Sanshin: Okinawan traditional three-stringed instrument; precursor to the shamisen.

Chapter 11

Several days after the tumultuous SA on Iriomote Island concluded and halfway through summer vacation, Homura and Touya received a direct invitation from Honba Institute.
Formally known as ‘Honba Engineering Research Institute’, it was a large enterprise famous worldwide for making cars and motorcycles.
It also had a close relationship with the Exploration Club as the developer of the humanoid probe units that were planned for use on Nutella.
Honba Institute’s shares in the field of household caregiving robots that had rapidly boomed in Japan was still low, but their research and development were very advanced, and they were planning to do a comeback by introducing sophisticated and high-performance robots into the market.
One of their robotics division’s R&D facilities was located only a few train stations away from Seiran High.
That facility was Ameno’s place of birth.
When they got off at a quiet station in the suburbs, Touya and Homura realized they had miscalculated their arrival time.
“Ah… the next shuttle bus won’t be here for about forty minutes.”
“No wonder there’s no one else here.”
Homura looked over the peaceful roundabout on the road in front of them where not a single waiting taxi was to be seen.
To get to Honba Institute’s assembly plant, Homura and Touya needed to take the institute’s shuttle bus for visitors from the nearest station they were currently at. They should have also been able to visit the adjoining R&D lab building on the factory grounds by riding the bus, but now…
“All right, let’s try getting there on foot then! It isn’t that far away, right?”
“That’s a rare proposal coming from you. I don’t mind walking, but aren’t you bad with hot weather…? Ah.”
Homura stepped out from beneath the shade of the train station into the midsummer sunlight. Blinking at the bright light as he watched her, Touya noticed something and suddenly clammed up.
“……What?”
“No, I was just thinking that you look well done there.”
“…Ugh… Am I supposed to be grilled fish or something…?”
Homura embarrassingly hunched over as she felt his gaze on the nape of her neck.
“…By the way, you really must have had a tough time with all the back-to-back meetings at the SA, Touya-kun!”
“You’re bringing that up again?”
Homura couldn’t help worrying over the boundary of skin that had immediately peeled off. She was currently covering it up with skin care

cream, but she hadn't made such a careless blunder since elementary school.
And then there was the… how to call it, the lifejacket tan? Having such odd tan marks that were difficult to explain to others was quite disastrous for a girl like her. And her frequency in going outside had dropped sharply in the past few days too. Having to confront this harsh truth every day each time she changed her clothes or went to bathe was pretty depressing for her.
She felt even more vexed when she heard after the SA ended that the other female Exploration Club members had been secretly prescribed sunscreen from the older members.
"You really do tend to hold a grudge over things like this, Hinooka. And you won't tell me the details of the incident that happened *over there* at all."
"But… I was told to keep my mouth shut about it until next year…"
"Why? About what? It's something involving Nutella, right? How nice. I gotta admit, I'm feeling pretty jealous of you right now."
"Gurgh… I want to say it… I really want to talk about everything that happened… But the only thing I can tell you is that you'll have another chance next year."
Homura placed a hand on Touya's shoulder with a clearly patronizing attitude.
"I see, I see. Well, I'll look forward to it. Come on, let's go."
Though depressed at how quickly she was brushed off, Homura followed after Touya.
"Anyway, it's not like a little tan bothers me at my age. Rather, it's this irregular color pattern that I want to get rid of…"
"Yeah. Right now I can't even tell whether you're supposed to be a panda or a Malayan tapir."
"H-How can you be so cruel, Touya-kun? Even this serves as a nice memory of our trip to the south, you know? I'm like an urban angelfish that dyes the town in tropical colors, so to speak."
"Speaking of which, Shimadai shitsuke[1] is pretty tasty."
"Yeah."
The two of them walked for a while, getting some distance from the residential district around the station, and eventually their surroundings began to shift to arable and cultivated land.
Immediately after they began walking, Homura had felt like roasted chicken squeezed of fat in a microwave oven as she was hit by the moist mirage-inducing heat, but now that they had reached a wide open area like this, the breeze had remarkably picked up and diminished the heat.
Homura was a bit surprised at how there was such a suburban landscape just a few stations away from the town area she usually lived in.
As they followed a road flanked by the embankments of irrigation ditches, Homura casually asked a question.
"Has your mother visited you recently, Touya-kun?"
"No, not at all—wait, why are you suddenly bringing that up now?"

“…Err, because it’s around the season for the O-Bon Festival[2].”
“It’s not like my mom has died or anything,” said Touya with a laugh.
Homura had thoughtlessly said that merely because “O-Bon season = event where family and relatives gather together” in her head.
Though she felt embarrassed at her own careless remark, Homura realized that this was a big issue that bother Homura somewhere deep in her heart.
“…Will you be going to your grandparents’ home for O-Bon?”
“Yeah. I couldn’t go visit last year because I was studying for entrance exams, so I’m going to going for sure this year. My dad, well, may or may not come depending on his work, though…”
Seeing Homura frown slightly, Touya pre-empted her before she could say anything. “It’s pretty fun when I go by myself too. I go visit my cousins over there as well.”
“You visit your mother’s hometown too?”
“Yeah, it’s one of the places I visit over O-Bon.”
“Hmm. Sounds about the same as my family.”
In that case… As her mind continued to ponder further, Homura asked another serious question.
“…Is your mother at her family’s home right now?”
“No, she apparently spends most of her time wandering around somewhere with no set destination. She does seem to drop in at her family’s home every once in a while, but she always ends up being scolded by grandma and grandpa and then stealthily leaves again.”
“Huh. She sounds like a shrewd stray cat… She really does seem like quite the free-spirited person. Still, how does she run away from home… err, I mean, travel around?”
“She tours around the country on a bicycle.”
Touya held out his hands and pretend to grip some imaginary handlebars.
“She’s quite queer for her age. She used to be a motorcycle cop. Both my parents were part of the police originally.”
“Heh. You mean those cops who ride on motorcycles instead of patrol cars, like the ones you see at road intersections under maintenance?”
“Hmm? Well, basically. That’s why the one thing I refuse to become is a policeman. I couldn’t stand it if people started stating that the members of the Touya family are only capable of being policemen, you know?”
“Ahaha.”
The mother that Touya described had a much wilder image than the overly sensitive runaway woman that Homura had imagined at first.
Also, although Touya spoke about it nonchalantly, Homura didn’t know just how rare a female motorcycle cop was in Japan.
“My mom was part of something called the Mobile Traffic Squad. Well, I don’t really know much about her work there. It’s all in the past now.”
Touya’s father was an active police detective.
Homura naturally thought of saying things like ‘So your parents were coworkers who married each other’ and ‘Did your mother resign after

marrying?’ to follow the flow of the conversation, but in light of the current situation of the Touya family, it didn’t seem like it would turn into a cheerful topic, so Homura swallowed her words and changed the subject.
“B-By the way, did you know that my mom also used to have a motorcycle license?”
“Eh!? Your mother!? Wow, that’s a shock. I can’t imagine her riding a motorcycle at all.”
“Right? Me too. Tsuyu even still thinks it’s a joke.”
“You really surprised me there. That doesn’t fit her image at all.” Touya crossed his arms, impressed. “…No, wait… maybe not… She might actually look good in a jumpsuit…”
Seeing this young boy pondering that with his hand on his chin, Homura shouted “What kind of indecent things are you imagining about my mother!?” and elbowed him in the side.
They started to detect the faint smell of chemicals mixed within the gentle breeze.
Factory plants could be seen dotting the landscape beyond the fresh wheat fields, emitting white smoke from chimneys.
As she watched that sight from the corner of her eye, Homura once more brought up something that just occurred to her.
“Hey, Touya-kun.”
“Hmm?”
“I plan to go to the pool with Kujou-san tomorrow. Not the public pool, the indoor domed recreational pool with slides and spas and open terraces.”
“Congratulations on your date.”
“Yeah, I finally managed to reach the first date stage. *grin*”
Making a double peace sign with both hands, Homura reported with a serious expression how she’d achieved her dearest wish.
When she’d succeeded in getting Kujou Orie to reluctantly agree to come over the phone, Homura had tumbled off her bed while pumping her fist.
Still, why had she proposed such an excessive and open-ended plan for their outing—
“…Touya-kun… would you like to come too?”
“Ah? No way. You’re probably planning not to swim much and instead walk around eating sweets and shopping for stuff you’re not even sure you want to buy, right?”
“You—”
After halting for a brief moment, Homura went on the counteroffensive as she was filled with strong feelings of dissatisfaction.
“Well, well, you’ve got quite the guts to turn down an invitation from two super-class high school girls so easily.”
“What ‘super-class’? In that case, would you come along on the three-stage Enoshima rocket bike tour with Doi from my class and Moriguchi from your class?”

“What, Enoshima? You mean that far-away place past Kamakura? Are you stupid? How many kilometers away do you think that is? Just go by train if you want to go. That kind of thing is incomprehensible to me.”
“I find your plan to go to an indoor pool in the middle of summer even more incomprehensible. And just after we got back from Iriomote island too.”
“What!?”
“Enough already. Just go have fun together with Kujou.”
“……”
Homura couldn’t understand Touya at all.
She couldn’t, but he somehow seemed to be having fun as he pulled out some long grass along the side of the road and wielded it like a fencing rapier.
Homura finally figured that her earlier worries were groundless.
“…Hey, how about you bring along Inari-senpai too?” Touya suddenly suggested.
“Kujou-san and… Inari-senpai? Mumumu. Even I can’t imagine what kind of chemical reaction that might produce.”
“True. Sorry, it was just a random thought.”
Speaking of which, Inari was the type to always speak frankly like Kamikoma-senpai. Homura could picture her unexpectedly getting along with Kujou.
“…Will you come if Inari-senpai comes too? By the way, you still haven’t seen senpai in a swimsuit yet, have you?”
“I’m definitely not coming.”
“Despite how she looks, Inari-senpai is still older than us. She looks quite cute in a swimsuit, you know? Then, how about if my mom comes too?”
“Why your mother!?”
“Muuu… Are you saying you won’t come even if Misasagi-senpai participates!?”
“Of COURSE I’d come in that case!”
Touya swung his grass sword up towards the blue sky high above.
Of course, they both knew that Misasagi-senpai was always busy devoting all her time and energy to Exploration Club activities, so there was no way she’d have that kind of casual free time.
Even so, the two of them couldn’t help swelling with excitement at the thought of Misasagi-senpai coming to play at the pool.
“Anyway, in the first place, if it turned into an Exploration Club gathering like that, wouldn’t it make things more uncomfortable for Kujou?”
“…Yeah, you’re right. Let’s scrap that idea, then.”
Several dozen minutes later after trudging stoutheartedly through the heat that bathed the roadway—
Just as Homura was starting to grow annoyed at the sweat sticking to her tank top, the Honba Institute site came into view.
The site was several times bigger than that of the average school, and tall and white walled factory facilities covered most of the grounds.

After checking in and getting permission at the security guard station next to the main gate, the two of them entered the factory grounds.
Homura wanted to jump into the buildings, but a nearby guide sign showed that the specific development lab that was their destination was located farther back within the grounds. Homura walked unsteadily as she desperately sought the cool embrace of air conditioning.
The factory grounds were pretty quiet and there weren't many employees around to be seen. Even the vast parking lot was mostly deserted.
The development lab they finally arrived at was a four-storied building twice the size of their club building surrounded by a high fence unlike the other buildings on the grounds, which gave it a very strict and heavily guarded air.
"It kinda resembles the club building from the outside."
"Yeah. But this is the kind of place that has to be vigilant for real industrial spies and the like. When I think of that, it's kinda exciting."
They entered a utilitarian reception lobby that was currently unmanned. After they announced their arrival through the intercom and waited a little while, someone finally appeared.
It was a young woman wearing a bright orange jumpsuit with the logo HONBA on it.
"You two are from the Seiran Exploration Club, right? You're really early. Did you come here directly?"
"That's right. Sorry, was that a bother for you?" Touya politely bowed his head. "Hey, Hinooka?"
"Fuah!?"
Homura, who had been enraptured as she clung to the cool leather sofa in the air-conditioned lobby, jumped in surprise.
"Fufu. No, not at all." The jumpsuit woman shook her head.
"Nice to meet you… Umm, I thought a car factory would be much noisier and busier than this. It seems really quiet around here." Homura honestly expressed her doubts.
"Ah, that. We do have assembly lines here, but most of them are cleaned or inspected over summer break. This development lab is the same."
"Eh, then, umm, you're working during your time off, miss? I'm really sorry for the trouble…" Homura felt truly obliged.
Possibly due to always hearing her father's complaints, Homura tended to react sensitively to the subject of signing in and off at work.
"It's fine, really. The dates and schedule just happened to line up like this, so it's not like I went out of my way to accommodate you two. There are also certain circumstances that required my presence here anyway."
Would it be better to describe her as honest, or blunt?
Homura was surprised, having imagined a typical researcher in a white lab coat since this was a cutting-edge robotics development lab.
The woman had her back hair done up in a neat braid with a hairpin and wore a bright smile.

Her age seemed to be about the same or a bit older than Fujimori-sensei's. She stuck her work gloves, which had black stains from what was probably tool-related work, into her pocket and shook hands with both Homura and Touya.
"Sorry for the late introduction. I'm Akado of the Honba Institute's Robotics Development Lab. Nice to meet you two. Ah, this is my confidentiality clearance license issued by the UNPIEP. You can check it out just to be on the safe side."
She handed them a registration card issued by the UNPIEP Japanese Branch, which showed that she was cleared to share the same level of information as regular Exploration Club members.
—Homura hadn't known about it when she'd joined the club, but she had come to learn through the SA and her regular Exploration Club training that there were many adults besides administrators like Fujimori-sensei who aided the Exploration Club in related positions like this in every field.
Homura and Touya showed their own cards as well.
"Touya Takumi-kun and Hinooka Homura-san… Yeah. Perhaps because of all the talk I've heard about you and the photos I've seen of you, this doesn't really feel like my first time meeting you guys."
"Do you mean you've heard about us from Ameno?"
"Yeah, and Mori-chan… ah, I mean, Fujimori-sensei too. Have you heard anything about me from Ameno?"
"Ah, right… Weren't you the one who chose Ame-chan's swimsuit?"
"That's right. How was it? I spent an unexpectedly long time agonizing over the choice."
"It really suited her well! Right, Touya-kun?"
"She was already wearing it when we boarded the plane."
Akado smiled happily.
Homura noticed some faint freckles on her nose and cheeks. They were hidden beneath makeup, but possibly because of her white-toned skin, they still stood out and looked a bit unnatural compared to the rest of her face.
In Homura's opinion, those freckles didn't detract from her looks, which Homura categorized as an Akita-type beauty[3] in her mental files, but rather added a cute charm to her.
But what Homura found even more out of place was her bad fashion sense in wearing a rough-looking jumpsuit over her slender body and sloping shoulders. There should have been other outfits to wear even for hands-on work.
Homura intuitively guessed that, swimsuit choice aside, Ameno's boyish style was likely the influence of this person.
"—Looks like we still have a bit of time."
After looking at her watch, Akado gestured them to follow her. She was apparently going to give them a tour of the facility.
"I was transferred here from Honba Institute's head office. My team wasn't originally connected to the Nutellan probe unit project, but rather started

off as a diverse group that did more standard research and development. I basically serve as the assistant to our section chief Toneri, who's busy all the time. I was originally just a software specialist who developed in-house modules for design tools though, hahaha."
"So you're a programmer, then?" asked Touya.
"Well, yeah… but now I pretty much do any and all odd jobs that are assigned to me."
Akado pulled up the sleeves of her jumpsuit and made a typical manual labor pose. Her expression was brimming with confidence, but she unfortunately lacked that kind of strong image.
Touya and Homura gazed over the interior of the development lab in a slightly reserved manner like proper visitors.
At the other end of the glass-walled corridor they walked through was a large studio-like room containing displays of what appeared to be prototypes of caregiving robots lined up next to each other like on a film set.
The caregiving robots, which unlike Ameno had deformed and flat bodies, were all set up in a resting position along the walls, really making the room look like a true development lab.
"……"
Touya was excitedly looking over the robot development displays, but Homura was preoccupied by a different train of thought.
Homura had another objective in coming to this lab: Ameno's room.
Ameno should have her own room in this facility which she had used until she started to live at Fujimori's apartment.
"Living" and "lodging" might not have been the right description for Ameno's time here, but this was still the home in which she'd been born and raised.
Speaking of which, Ameno still had yet to show herself.
As Homura was thinking about such things, Akado went on to reconfirm things with the two of them.
"—Now then, today, you'll be meeting with Chief Toneri, the guy who invited you both here, but have you heard anything about him from Mori-chan?"
Touya responded to Akado's probing question in a meek tone.
"Toneri-san is… a former Exploration Club member who explored Nutella in the same party as Fujimori-sensei, which basically makes him our respected senpai as an investigator. And I heard that his class was 'mage', right? Those facts alone make me pretty excited to meet him, but…"
"—But?" Akado urged him to continue.
"For some reason, sensei was in pretty low spirits when she talked about him… She said that he's a real weirdo, and that we should only take a tenth of what he says seriously."
"As expected of Mori-chan. Good. In that case, I don't need to warn you any further," said Akado with a wry smile.

“Mumumu… Just what kind of person is he?”
Homura kept quiet about how she’d already categorized him as a weirdo from the little she’d heard about him during her chats with Ameno.
“Ah, one more thing. Hinooka-san?” Akado turned to Homura.
“Yes?”
“Fujimori-sensei probably already told you, but—Chief Toneri tends to say things that repudiate the people he talks to, but you mustn’t lash back. Even if you feel slighted and get irritated, just ignore him by thinking of him as a child. If you let it get to you, I’m the one who’ll suffer for it.”
“Ignore him? But isn’t that rude to him as our respected senpai?”
Akado was really going out of her way to warn them. And especially Homura in particular.
Homura couldn’t recall Ameno ever censuring the man that harshly, though. Perhaps she just had a different opinion since he was technically her birth parent?
“If you really can’t endure his behavior even so, feel free to report it to me. Dealing with that is within the scope of my job, after all.”
“S-Sure, I’ll do my best.”
As she assured Homura that it was ‘within the scope of her job’, Akado made a gesture that mimicked strangling a living chicken. What was that supposed to mean?
“Well, I suppose it wouldn’t be fair to fill you with any further preconceptions of him.”
After giving them a brief tour of the building, Akado brought Touya and Homura to the top floor.
There were big and showy warning signs that stated ‘Entry past this point is forbidden to the general public’, which made them keenly realize that the next area was the center of this facility’s classified research.
First, they entered a huge corner room where two walls were completely covered by windows.
Inside the room was a large desk with a large and unfamiliar work machine —though it was actually just a lightweight laptop with a forty-nine-key keyboard—on top. It was a huge difference from Fujimori’s messy desk in the staffroom.
And in the center of the room was a man sleeping reclined in a designer chair facing parallel to the desk.
He wore a casual outfit of worn-out jeans and a color patterned dress shirt. The white lab coat he wore over it and his loosely-tied necktie seemed to barely support his title and position as the chief in charge.
The stripes of sunlight that leaked through the window blinds made his pale blond hair shine a bit.
It was precisely the kind of unnatural-looking scene that you’d expect in a promotion video for the Global Convention of Narcissists. And yet, irritatingly enough, it actually looked like a pretty striking portrait.

Confused, Homura glanced sideways at Akado, but instead of the exasperated expression she'd expected, Akado was wearing a slight, defiant smile.
"Buon Giorno! Signore![4]" Akado called out without bothering to go check on the sleeping man. "I've brought the two investigators from Seiran High. You know, the ones who were central to the first contact on Nutella?"
The slightly grotesque-looking stuffed animal placed on top of the man's head slipped off, revealing vivid green eyes.
"……"
He slowly closed his drowsy eyelids once more, and when he next opened them, his expression completely changed to an overly ingratiating smile.
"……Uu…"
Homura gulped in surprise.
Fujimori, Akado and Ameno hadn't told Homura that Chief Toneri was so stunningly handsome.
Even the stubble on his chin, which wasn't really to Homura's tastes, seemed like an exotic accent to the rest of his face.
"—_—"
Toneri silently reached for the food tray on his desk and suddenly lifted it up to eye level.
"This pastrami sandwich has the wrong proportion of black pepper. The pepper has been grinded too finely and lacks freshness. I guess Honba doesn't have the money to procure fresh pepper."
"Please don't calmly ignore our guests. You're the host today, remember, Chief Toneri?"
"—Host?" The man tilted his head in puzzlement.
His long blond hair was tied up behind his head. He looked like the typical hacker in Hollywood movies except for that one distinctive trait of his.
"No, I didn't call them here. I merely said that I needed to collect data because there were one or two points I wanted to understand about the incident in question."
"And that's why I invited them here. Well, it's fine with me as long as you at least stay in the room with them for the allotted time."
Akado showed no signs of budging on the matter.
Toneri tilted the back of his chair forward and glared at Akado as he bent forward with his elbows resting on top of his knees. It seemed that Homura and Touya were being ignored here, as usual.
"…Just when will you start properly dressing like a researcher's assistant, Akado?"
"Geez… What's that even supposed to look like?"
"It means having an intellectual and tidy appearance that reflects your loyalty and commitment. I'd prefer you wear a suit from Prada or Ferretti that would gladden my eyes even with a meager physique like yours."
"Like a Bond girl[5]? Or a seductive secretary from an evil organization? You know, *Sky-kun*, it's true that I'm an assistant, but it's not like I'm your direct

subordinate. If you weren't a handsome half-Italian guy, I would have already asked for a transfer long ago."
Ah, so she does acknowledge his good looks, thought Homura, strangely understanding.
In that case, this must have been the clear compromise that Miss Akado came to, perhaps because the situation between them was different than it used to be, or perhaps because she'd simply gotten tired of forcibly hiding her honest feelings.
"In the end, you're just another frivolous female babirusas[6] who acts pretentious."
Female babirusa… Both Homura and Touya were taken aback by this sudden shift to a bloody battle of words.
Akado gestured as she vehemently rebutted him.
"And like I've already told you countless times, I'm here to prevent you with your tendency to calmly say rude and vulgar words like that from influencing Ameno, our company's most precious asset."
"Don't misunderstand, Akado. It's true that Ameno is still quite young, but she isn't our child. Don't measure her by human standards. That won't benefit Ameno either."
"…Kuh… Fuu…"
At first, Akado swelled with anger, but in the end, her shoulders tiredly slumped and she bowed her head apologetically to Homura and Touya.
"Truly, I'm sorry for this. I feel like I'm going to commit an act of violence at this rate, so I'll temporarily withdraw from the room. I'll bring back some cool drinks for you."
"I'll have a Caffè Americano," requested Toneri with no hesitation at all.
In response, Akado merely pointed at the half-broken Expresso machine sitting in a corner of the room.
"Oops."
"Understand, chief? I'm leaving these two to you. If you abandon them to go off and play, I'll *report it*."
"Hey, cut it out. Even I care about my own life."
After Akado left the room, Toneri let out a huge sigh.
"You're Chia's students, right?"
This was the second person that Homura had met who called Fujimori-sensei 'Chia'.
"Yes. Fujimori-sensei is always taking care of us," said Touya.
"We look forward to working with you today," added Homura.
Touya and Homura then introduced themselves to Toneri. Toneri stared at them for a while, and then…
"Polite kids are wonderful."
That was clearly a sarcastic remark aimed at a certain someone.
His earlier dangerous mood was gone now, and it was as if he had suddenly become much younger and childish.

Homura had heard that he was several years older than Fujimori-sensei, but he didn't look older at all, possibly due to the complete lack of composure and maturity in his demeanor and his rude manner of speaking.
"Umm, I was told that you're a veteran mage, so I brought this along."
Homura timidly handed him a white Rubik's cube, which she'd gotten at the discussion between mages at the SA.
"Veteran is a bit much… And I'm completely unconnected to Seiran High, too. But anyway, that's a Rubik's puzzle, right? The Exploration Club still uses those things?"
"You may call it 'those things', but… I can't even properly use it…" Homura shamefully admitted.
"I also used one for a short time, but its pattern formation is inefficient. Don't you agree?"
Toneri showed little interest in the cube and casually tossed it back to Homura.
Toneri's table didn't have a single drawer, while the metal netted basket next to it that seemed to be a trash can served as the container for all his things. It was stuffed to the brim with all sorts of miscellaneous items of various colors.
"It should be right around here…"
Toneri stuffed his hand into the basket to search through it, and then finally pulled out three Rubik's cubes of varying sizes.
"Are those the ones you use for researching Nutellan magic, Toneri-san?"
"No way. I just play with these to kill time—There we go."
Toneri tossed the cubes into the air one after another and began to juggle them.
While continuing his juggling, he began to speak in a dispassionate tone.
"I'll start from the main point. I read the report by Kamikoma from that Hi-whatever school. I'd like you to reproduce the pattern you used in the battle against the Nutellan once more. I also have a spirit stone prepared, though it's of lower quality than the one you used before."
"…Pattern?"
While inwardly admiring Toneri's skill which matched that of a full-blown street performer, Homura repeated the word in confusion.
"I heard that the Nutellan used a gigantic fireball spell, but that's irrelevant. Even I can do something of that level. More importantly, I want to know the spell pattern of the multi-composite fireball that apparently stopped and pushed back the enemy's fireball."
"Multi-composite fireball?" Homura was taken aback by this term she was hearing for the first time.
"How about it? —Lad."
Eh, lad? Homura tilted her head in puzzlement.
She shared a glance with Touya, who then timidly corrected Toneri.
"Hinooka's the one who did that, not me."
"……"

His expression turning extremely disappointed, Toneri suddenly dropped his hands, and he then caught the falling cubes between his arms and carelessly threw them on the desk.
“…What, so it’s the girl? Then that means you’re Hinooka?”
“Well, yeah.”
She would have liked it if he’d noticed when she’d introduced herself, but he didn’t seem to care about it at all.
This guy really is rude… Wait… Eh?
Homura’s eyes widened in shock.
The colors patterns on the cube had been scattered and disconnected when she’d first seen them, but now all eighteen faces on the three cubes were perfectly aligned according to color. And it had happened in the span of less than a minute as Toneri rhythmically juggled them in the air while conversing with Homura and Touya at the same time—
“Then, you didn’t contribute anything to that mission, Touya?”
“That’s right. I… was unconscious at the time.”
“I see. Well, whatever.”
Touya didn’t seem to have noticed the change in the cubes as he talked with Toneri.
Toneri once more casually plunged his hand into the basket to take out a container of darts this time, and he began throwing them at the dartboard hanging on the wall.
However, he didn’t display much skill in this activity unlike the juggling.
There seemed to be various other strange goods for killing time in the basket.
It kinda reminded Homura of Ameno’s hobby of taking out strange items as if out of thin air and performing sleights of hand with them.
At around that time, Miss Akado returned with beverage pots and glasses in one hand, while holding a heavy-looking toolbox in the other for some reason. Though she was clearly exasperated upon seeing Toneri playing with darts as he talked, she seemed to be busy with work and left the room again. Perhaps she was in the middle of developing something?
After Toneri finished throwing all his darts and handily missing the target each time, the former mage at last got up from his chair.
“Hmph. So, Hinooka. I’d like you to come to the lab with me so that I can collect data on you with the brainwave scanner—but there’s something I need to do before that.”
“And that is?”
This time, Toneri took out a wine bottle and corkscrew from the ever-handy basket.
“Supper. It’s revenge to make up for that pastrami sandwich. Eat with me.”
“No, isn’t supper supposed to be some time after lunch—?”
“What, you guys won’t even drink wine with me?”
“High-schoolers who drink wine during the daytime are rare here in Japan,” Touya deadpanned.

“I don’t remember the Exploration Club being so strict and stuffy.”
“Could you not talk about the Exploration Club like some den of outlaws…?”
“How boring.”
After saying that, Toneri moved to leave the room at a quick pace, but then he suddenly stopped and turned back.
“…I changed my mind.”
Toneri’s green eyes peered hard over Homura.
“Now that I think about it, I heard that you have a good memory.”
“Hah.”
Well, that was true, technically. When it came to things like the days of the week when each shop sold a different specialty cake or the days when net drama shows were updated, her memory tended to be quite accurate.
“In that case, I guess I’ll just ask the person in question directly.”
“Eh—eh?”
That was my intention from the start… What was he planning to do, then?
Homura was filled with extremely natural doubts at this odd declaration, but it appeared that he really wasn’t fooling around here.
Sitting back down, Toneri snatched a cube from on top of the desk while spinning his chair, and he thrust it at Homura’s chest.
“Explain the principle. What was the pattern you used to make that multi-composite fireball?”
“Eh……?”
“Was it a composite of a regular polyhedron loop? Or did you skip the multi-dimensional rotational manipulation? What was the boost target of the Transport Ring and spirit stone? Well, how about it?”
Toneri pressed her with question after question.
Feeling perplexed and cornered, Homura reflexively looked at Touya to beg for help, but Touya merely stepped back and moved away from her.
“Hey—”
However, Touya walked back from the corner of the room soon after and interrupted Toneri who was still asking question.
“Toneri-san.”
“What is it?”
“Hinooka’s memory is actually quite half-baked and careless, so you won’t get the answers you’re looking for unless you question her more carefully and slowly.”
Touya had dragged out one of the chairs lying around that Toneri hadn’t even bothered to offer them and pulled it over next to the confused Homura. The way he briskly carried it in one hand was just like a veteran waiter.
“T-Thanks…”
However, Toneri remained brusque in the face of Touya’s display of consideration.
“She just needs to answer the questions. Or is my Japanese pronunciation off? Even if I look like this, I was still born in Japan, you know.”
Indeed, his Japanese was excellent.

By contrast, Japanese wasn't the forte of Homura, a pure-blooded Japanese native. She couldn't understand the intent or meaning behind Toneri's questions as he kept rattling on and on—
However, truthfully, his rude manner of speech resembled words straight out of a movie or drama, so it didn't actually irritate her that much. She might have lost her temper if the same words came from her younger sister Tsuyu, though.
"——"
Touya exasperatedly put his hands on his hips and glanced at Homura.
The weary smile Touya now wore made his babyish face look even more childlike, but when he then turned to face Toneri, that smile looked even scarier somehow, causing Homura to stiffen in fear that he was quietly angry, but her guess turned out to be wrong.
"Toneri-san, no, Toneri-senpai?"
"I'm not your senpai. Like I said, I'm unrelated to Seiran High."
"Even so, you're our respected senpai in the Exploration Club, and you're unequaled in your knowledge of Nutella. Most of all, you're Ameno's creator. You've indirectly helped us through various other pieces of equipment you've made as well, so I'm not angry."
"Angry?"
Toneri wore a look of blank confusion.
"I don't remember doing anything to displease you guys… What would you be angry about?"
His expression showed that he wasn't speaking sarcastically, but genuinely didn't understand. So this was what Fujimori-sensei meant when she said to take a tenth of what he said seriously. Touya's expression returned to being half-surprised and half-exasperated.
Heedless of the look he was getting, Toneri resumed speaking.
"There's no point in wasting time asking useless things. That's practically a crime. —Hinooka Homura, you're a prodigy at magic, right?"
Toneri said it as naturally as if he were asking 'You like ice cream, right, Homura?'
"Prodigy? No way, that's absurd—" Homura shook her head with wide eyes.
Toneri's expression turned weary and dejected.
"That. It's that kind of talk that I'm saying is pointless. It's not like prodigies are rare or anything. You can find them anywhere. There's some here, and there's some there. There's even some in the lab next to us."
To Homura, being called a prodigy was an evaluation that was far beyond her means and position. However, it appeared that Toneri wasn't just openly complimenting her…
"Prodigies are unusual creatures born according to a fixed probability. They're pretty much everywhere. They can't even compare to people who wear the shoes of destiny itself. Yeah, like your teacher Chia. Compared to her, all prodigies are like mere individual torches that can barely illuminate the way along the road."

This time, Toneri praised Fujimori quite highly.
Neither Homura nor Touya could understand his twisted way of viewing others at all, but they could at least tell that he wasn't saying it as flattery.
"Umm… I'm not really a prodigy, but can I… sit down?"
Truthfully, Homura still hadn't found the right timing to sit down and was currently stuck standing upright.
"Go ahead. If you feel pride in being able to walk upright, you can keep standing there as well if you wish," said Toneri, as blunt as always.
Homura awkwardly sat down on the chair that Touya had thoughtfully brought her.
"Err… The thing is, Toneri-san…"
Homura and Touya did their best to try explaining what had happened to this troublesome man who always went along at his own pace. Their explanation basically boiled down to how Hinooka Homura was little more than a novice as a mage and had barely any understanding about Nutellan magic theory. And how, though she had gotten an excellent score in her IE Aptitude in the past, her score had now gone down to an average value…
However, even after they exhausted all their efforts to explain, Toneri still seemed to be dubious.
"I find that hard to believe. Touya, have you dabbled in it a bit yourself?"
"You mean magic theory? My understanding of it is still at beginner's level. I've only glanced through the investigator manual on it, and I'm still a long ways from properly casting any spells."
"Hmm."
Homura agreed with Touya on that…
Even Misasagi-senpai, a magic warrior whose main specialty wasn't magic, could cast some amazingly skilled spells, and there were other full-fledged mages who had demonstrated their mastery of high level magic—Oozore-senpai from Nagumo High, who had the nickname Wizard; Hana Yashiki-senpai from Nadahama High; and "Songbird" Furumachi-senpai from Tazatani High. And those were just the few that Homura had encountered at the SA. After meeting such people, Homura and Touya were all the more painfully aware of their own inexperience.
"Umm… Back then, my head was pretty much filled with mostly fear, so I don't remember much of what I did."
Toneri was clearly taken aback by Homura's words, and he made an odd expression that seemed to say 'My, my, this creature suddenly started talking even though I didn't give permission', but Homura somehow managed to finish her sentence regardless.
"……Then you mean to say that you unconsciously established the spell pattern? That's not unheard of. There are even some researchers who have discovered chemical structural formula in their dreams."
"No, no, it wasn't like that kind of thing where inner inspiration runs on overdrive—"

How to explain that experience, which Homura still felt shivers at whenever she recalled it—that memory, which she felt detached from like it happened to someone else, even after she reread Kamikoma's report on the event?
"—At the time… I just desperately imagined the fireball pattern that I'd learned from Misasagi-senpai. The limited hexa-model pattern."
"1-8-15-12—Hi (Hydrogen), Ox (Oxygen), Ph (Phosphorous), Mg (Magnesium)—the tinderbox incantation? But that alone isn't enough to explain that phenomenon—"
Toneri recited from memory the incantation that Homura had mentally pictured back then.
"You apparently created and controlled multiple fireballs—an entire cluster of more than five hundred of them, though? You do remember that much, right?"
"…Y-Yes."
It was just as Kamikoma-senpai had written in her report, based on what she'd seen as the only observer there during the battle between Homura and Subaru-hime.
Homura hesitantly nodded.
"But, I didn't consciously think of making lots of fireballs like that… And I don't know how to do so either…"
"I figured. It's impossible to actually do, after all."
Homura was having trouble putting her thoughts into words, but Toneri didn't pay much attention to it and leaned back in his chair.
He looked up at the ceiling in the same slovenly napping pose as when they'd first entered the room.
"Roughly categorized, there are two known kinds of spells that create fireballs on Nutella.
"The first method manipulates the Nutellan air into a highly compressed flow and makes it react with organic matter. This works the same as normal combustion on Earth. It's no different than blowing air into charcoal using a *pair of bellows*. The spell utilizes a limited icosa-model and a limited hexa-model together in combination.
"The other method is to create heat. It's possible to cast it with a limited hexa-model, but a Rubik's model is more suitable if you're trying to make the fireball do complex movements. Both methods are commonly used in the Exploration Club these days."
It feels like the conversation has gotten really derailed—! Now Homura was truly thankful for the chair Touya had provided her.
"Umm, Misasagi-senpai taught me to cast the spell by directly turning magic energy into heat."
"That's right. In other words, it's the creation of heat. That rough and overly wasteful method has become the current mainstream. In the first place, there's no real opportunity to use fireball spells in the Exploration Club. At most, it's used for violence."

“Violence…?” asked Homura, feeling something heavy in her heart at the word.
“Yes, violence. The Nutellan civilization went through huge wars in the past. That much is unmistakable. The ruins we’ve discovered until now prove it. The fireball spell patterns became entrenched as a means of attack in such an environment. Investigators from Earth merely rediscovered it.”
“Rediscovered…? And what do you mean by ‘entrenched’?” Touya voiced the question that naturally came to his mind. “Also, even if it’s destructive, dynamite is used in building and tunnel construction, right? Is conflict really the natural way of things in a world where there’s fireball magic that even we can cast? Isn’t that like a world where all children carry guns?”
“I don’t think all Nutellans could use magic, though. Even we have different IE Aptitudes according to each individual. Even then, almost all the spells we’ve come up with are part of just one branch of the spell techniques that the Nutellans cultivated—and by ‘entrenched’, I’m referring to the transmission and propagation of the magic language.”
“Magic… language? Like English or French?” Homura’s question didn’t seem to be that far off the mark. Toneri turned to look at her.
“Of course. What else could you call it besides a language?”
“I heard that you were the one who created the system of spells currently used by the Japanese Exploration Club though, Toneri-san.”
“As I keep saying, that’s wrong. I merely rediscovered the spells and restructured them into a spell system suited for exploration. The scale is completely different, but what I did is basically the same as Dr. Chandra and his discovery of Nutella. I merely discovered a huge library and translated one or two books that were lying around at the entrance. I didn’t enter any further than that.”
Toneri’s brows knitted into a slight scowl. It was an unusual display of modesty that contrasted with his usual haughty behavior and of vexation that was hidden beneath it.
“Regarding spell patterns—the Exploration Club calls them incantations—I think that Nutellan magic is artificial in origin. The established patterns are like refined formulas and, to use chemistry as an example, act as catalysts to reactions derived from various spells. A diverse variety of spells were used on Nutella in the past. All I did was pursue traces of spells left by those predecessors and affixed new labels to them.”
Touya seemed unable to grasp the meaning of Toneri’s words.
“I don’t really get it, but… Did the first investigators to use magic on Nutella learn it from someone else? Or was it inherited from the Nutellans?”
“Did they find it in a spell book or something? Ahaha,” laughed Homura.
“……”
Homura thought she would be ridiculed in response, but Toneri remained silent.
“…Huh?”
Toneri appeared to be taking Homura’s joking words seriously.

“In a certain sense… that’s correct. Nutella itself is a giant magic system. If you’re asking who the first Earthling to use magic was, it definitely wasn’t me. Naturally, it was old man Chandra. Chandra never went to Nutella himself, but he launched the Hollow Axis telescope satellite and succeeded in making an imperfect index of Nutella.”
As Homura widened her eyes in surprise, Toneri continued explaining.
“Magic is something that’s passed down and transmitted. I’m an advocate of the Element Record Theory, that magic is recorded in the molecular elements on Nutella. Though, there are other researches who advocate the theory that magic is the result of unknown waves or cosmic radiation that we can’t yet observe—”
“Elements?”
“You mean like the air and water?”
“Si,” said Toneri with a nod.
“Is it like that theory that if you give thanks to water, it will become tastier?”
“That’s just occult pseudoscience,” Touya retorted.
“That kind of reaction is quite common.” Toneri gave a wry smile.
“Contagious magic is the most basic occult stuff out there. Until it becomes possible to investigate things on the atomic level on Nutella, this field of theory can’t avoid being slandered as occult.”
Touya rephrased and simplified Toneri’s explanation for himself.
“Magic… is spread and diffused throughout the air on Nutella?”
“That’s my pet theory. Magic is transmitted by breathing, by Nutellan-scale weather phenomenon, and even physical touch.”
Toneri picked up a nearby (paper) notepad and (old-fashioned) pen and drew a big circle. It was a perfect circle that was terrifyingly exact.
And then he drew various dots within it.
“To use Earth as an example, right now you’re definitely breathing the air someone on Earth exhaled a year ago. Air exhaled by the US president, the Pope and even Indian beggars is all, according to statistics, being breathed by you right now. And the reverse is also true.”
“……!?”
Homura reflexively covered her mouth.
“Right now? Right this instant?”
“Yes, right this instant, not just sometime in the past.”
Toneri wrote down on the notepad the amount and capacity of gas molecules within one breath, the average amount of times people breathed in one year, and the total volume of all the air on Earth, as well as the relationship between each of these factors.
All the mathematical formulas were gibberish to Homura, but the notes showed in concrete numbers that even a single breath contained an enormous number of molecules, and that the year-long accumulation of those breaths, which continued ceaselessly as part of living, added up to a value that more than supported the likelihood of Toneri’s claim.

“Nutella is overwhelmingly bigger than Earth, but even so, it takes less than three years for gas molecules touched by a single person from Earth to spread and diffuse throughout all of Nutella.”
Toneri dropped the notepad on the desk with a thud and continued his explanation.
“—Now then, Hinooka, there’s a possibility that the spell you casted deviates from that framework. This is dangerous. That’s why I called you here.”
“What I did… was dangerous?”
“Very much so.”
Toneri was completely serious.
“One possibility I can think of is that you discovered a continuous spell pattern”
“A continuous… pattern?” Touya titled his head in puzzlement.
“You can also call it a catalyst pattern. It forms a cycle and stimulates some kind of reaction. Or perhaps slows it down. That’s what kind of magic it is. Those Nadahama guys are engrossed in discovering such catalyst patterns and obsessively devoted to it even now. Hah.”
Bothered by Toneri’s seemingly ridiculing tone, Homura spoke up.
“The people from Nadahama High are really earnest and diligent, you know? They weren’t treating it like some kind of hobby… I couldn’t keep up with their explanation at all during the SA.”
“I wonder about that. Like I said, prodigies can be found everywhere. Though, stupid and foolish women are even more commonplace—Hey, well, don’t be so hard on yourself.”
As Homura turned dispirited, Toneri drew several circles in the air with the pen in his hand.
“Using the repellant force of fireballs to capture a single huge fireball is a wonderful idea. However, it’s impossible to achieve the parallel distributed thought-processing necessary to implement such a ridiculous feat as individually controlling over five hundred fireballs. This is an absolute fact. Because otherwise, it’d require that a human become inhuman.”
“Haah—but isn’t it possible to ‘think while doing it’?”
This time Toneri was the one to slump his head at Homura’s words.
“Hey now… I myself am only able to work on three Rubik’s cubes at the same time, but that’s because I switch between working on each one in turns inside my head. I don’t actually solve them all at the same time.
“—If it were possible to think two things at the same time, then it would be equally possible to think five hundred or even fifty billion things at the same time, since you wouldn’t need to waste time or space to form patterns.”
Fifty… billion…
Homura gulped.
Touya also wore a worried expression as he asked a new question.
“So you’re saying it’s fortunate that Hinooka only went as far as five hundred? That’s the reason you said that Hinooka is dangerous?”

“Yes. Or rather, perhaps it would be better to call it inevitable—a mistaken formula will kill all proof of its existence. Contradictory magic will produce dangerous side effects. In other words, magic that goes against nature on Nutella will kill the user. Yet despite that, you’re not dead, Hinooka. Why? That’s what I want to know.”
After suddenly saying all that, Toneri shut his eyes and turned silent, initiating his ‘Narcissist mode’.
…Even if you tell me that…
Homura felt discouraged at the thought that this person would probably just nod in understanding if she had burned up and died back then.
Eventually, Toneri spoke up again.
“—Continuous magic is one of my dreams.”
Was he deviating off topic again?
“Exactly what would continuous magic be able to do?”
“All kinds of things. It’d make flight through the sky possible for temporary period of times. It’s quite an attractive idea, right?”
Fly—through the sky! Homura nodded enthusiastically.
“But, like I said, it’s very dangerous—for example, say you discovered a pattern for a fireball that would eternally continue to burn and combust. But what if you couldn’t stop that fire? The whole matter would eventually become quite troublesome. Having to fear a meltdown on Nutella isn’t very appealing. And as another example—though the idea comes from nonsensical science fiction—say you create a crystallization pattern for ice that continues to freeze even at high temperatures. It could freeze all of Nutella in a single night and drastically change the environment there. All Nutellan lifeforms would probably go extinct…”
Toneri explained these examples in a believable manner.
“You have approached one step closer to such dangers… maybe. My fears might be groundless, though.”
“I really hope that’s the case…”
“Well, I’ve already achieved an example of it myself, though. I don’t know about the Nutellans, but I believe this achievement rivals even the work of old man Chandra.”
“……You mean you’ve created a continuous spell!?”
“It’s my greatest work at present. Hard to say whether it’s my magnum opus or not, though.”
Huh, it isn’t?
“……”
Touya crossed his arms and tried to think of what it might be.
However, Homura was the one to realize the answer first.
“Are you talking about… Ame-chan…?”
Upon hearing that name, Toneri looked puzzled, so Homura clarified.
“Is it Ameno-chan—in other words, Fujimori Ameno?” asked Homura eagerly.
“Si.”

Toneri nodded with a smile.
The greatest piece of magic that the former mage had created—that was the thinking robot Ameno.
“—There’s something I want to show you before I sample your brain scans in the lab.”
After saying that, Toneri lead Homura and Touya out of his office.
As they walked through the hallway, Touya asked Toneri a question.
“Toneri-san, you were the one who made the Nutella-use communicator, right?”
“That thing Seiran requested to be made? That Misasagi princess was the one who actually made it. I leave the provision of all tools and components to Akado. I don’t have much involvement in that kind of thing.”
“Still, the work you do here is amazing.”
“Touya-kun, more importantly!”
Homura pushed aside Touya and looked at Toneri with an expectant expression.
“Umm, Toneri-san? The room where Ameno-chan was raised is in this building, right?”
“Si. That’s where I’m taking you now.”
“Wow, really?”
“However, it’s no longer Ameno’s room,” said Toneri nonchalantly.
“Hmm? What do you mean? Is it because she moved to Fujimori-sensei’s apartment?”
“You’ll understand once we get there,” was the only thing Toneri said.
Behind another layer of security, they entered a room about the size of a 2LDK apartment[7].
The interior design of the place resembled the model display room they’d seen on the lower floor. One side had a glass wall beyond which could be seen the living room. There seemed to be another room further with proper walls to ensure privacy.
However, the place only had minimal furniture and furnishings.
The illumination was low and dim, making the whole place seem deserted as if the occupants had just moved out.
Within the silence, only the smooth and unceasing tapping of keyboard typing could be heard.
Toneri called out to the shadowed figure that was sitting at a writing desk by the window.
“I thought you’d be here again today as well.”
Within Toneri’s rude speech tone, there was a trace of affection.
“You already noticed, right? At least properly face us. You should already be acquainted with these guys from Seiran, right?”
There was a girl sitting lightly on the chair in front of the desk.
“Kanae-san?”
The girl was Kanae Yuri, a first year Exploration Club member at Hiyoshizaka High.

Kanae slowly looked up from the laptop on the small writing desk.
“Why is Kanae-san here?”
Kanae’s eyes stared at Touya and Homura in turn from behind the glasses she wore.
“…Is there a reason I shouldn’t be here…?”
Expressing little interest in them, Kanae went back to typing on the laptop.
Homura’s eyes widened as she stared at her.
“Kanae-san’s a robot…!?”
“……”
The sound of typing suddenly stopped.
Kanae knit her brows slightly as she remained silently facing the laptop…
After a brief period of silence, Toneri suddenly burst out laughing.
“Uhahaha——”
“Wha—Toneri-san—!?”
Toneri bent over holding his stomach and put his hand against a wall to support him. Seeing him roaring in laughter made Homura realize that she’d made an embarrassing misunderstanding, and she quickly turned red in the face.
“…S-Sorry… I just thought…”
Homura hung her head, wanting a hole to hide herself in. Meanwhile, Touya nonchalantly spoke up.
“Robot thing aside, it’s bad for your eyes to work on a computer in such a dimly lit place.”
“…The factors that determine strength of eyesight are almost all genetic. And I don’t strain my eyes on the computer that much.”
Basically, Kanae was saying, “So mind your own business.”
Incidentally, Kanae didn’t wear glasses in public, but apparently did wear work-use ones when staring at a screen. Well, even without thinking hard about it, a robot that wore glasses was an unlikely scenario.
She hadn’t worn glasses on Nutella either. Her eyesight probably increased on Nutella like Touya. However, her mood didn’t seem to invite any detailed questions about it.
“I’m also often struck by the thought that Yuri is a being far removed from God’s creations.”
“Be quiet, Maestro.”
As Toneri held back further laughter with his shoulders shaking minutely, Kanae rebuked him in a bitter tone.
“Maestro? What’s that about?” asked Touya. He knew the rough meaning of the word
Maestro was the Italian word for “great master” or “expert” and was also used to denominate the “bosses” of European craftsmen guilds in the Middle Ages.
Perhaps having judged that she wouldn’t be able to continue working at this point, Kanae closed the laptop and put her hands on her lap with a sigh. She took off her glasses and placed them next to the laptop.

“This guy makes me call him that. That was the condition for letting me use this room.”
“Heh, then that makes you Toneri’s pupil—his mage apprentice, right? Like that Disney movie.” Touya was honestly impressed.
“It’s not as nice as you think. And the original story was by Goethe[8], not Disney.”
Unexpectedly, Kanae wore a much more displeased expression at this than Homura’s earlier robot claim.
Touya tilted his head in confusion at this, while Homura peered at each of their expressions and measured the power dynamics between them. The boss who started it all merely grinned.
“Can I ask what you’re doing?” asked Homura.
“……I’m composing incantations,” murmured Kanae. “This facility has surplus computing and calculation resources during summer break…”
“I’m here working over the break, though. Try to show a bit more restraint. It’s irritating when the low-priority queue lists pile up in the mainframe. Geez, you said you wanted to just borrow some corner of the facility to work, but you ended up commandeering this entire bedroom.”
“You’re the one who said you didn’t mind as long as it was within the range of the Exploration Club’s activities, Maestro.”
Kanae smoothly rebutted the grumbling Toneri.
“Composing incantations? You mean you’re designing original incantations? That’s amazing.”
Touya was much more interested by the topic than Homura, who felt like she was being left behind.
Homura desperately tried to join the conversation.
“So you really can create spells with a computer… Ah… it’s like, you know, err…”
“—Hmm?”
In a blind attempt to grab the others’ attention, Homura said something strange again.
“Like how you can’t tell the difference between well-boiled pounded fishcakes and kamaboko[9]—right?”
“Are you trying to pick a fight with people from Shizuoka Prefecture[10]?”
Touya sighed in exasperation, but then suddenly raised his head as he seemed to remember something.
“Could it be…Hey, Kanae? I heard this from some senior Nadahama members during the SA, but the currently used digital collaboration tool that was made by Exploration Club underwent a massive update this year, right? I heard that it works far better compared to last year. It’s gotten a lot of positive reviews.”
Kanae listened to Touya without showing much reaction.
“They say that a huge portion of it was due to an anonymous helper. Is that you?”
“…Yes.”

Kanae readily confirmed Touya's guess.
"Touya-kun, you always talk too bluntly to everyone."
"—Ah, sorry."
"You're always tactless like that, Touya-kun. Even though you're always so polite with senpai."
"Hey, you also call me 'that guy' or 'glasses' behind my back, don't you?"
"That right there is the kind of rude tone I'm talking about. Geez~"
After looking at the miffed Homura from the corner of her eye, Kanae looked back down at her laptop and began to murmur.
"The collaboration tool has a semi-open development environment, so I modified the parts that caught my attention a bit. The goal was to make it an intuitive and user-friendly GUI[11] that even someone like Hinooka-san could easily use, but it was ultimately a failure."
"Aha. Sorry about that."
Homura jokingly hung her head in apology.
Touya crossed his arms and spoke up.
"When I heard that Akado-san was a programmer, I first wondered whether it might be her, but I was wrong… I see, so it was done by Kanae, not Akado-san—but you hardly use that collaboration tool yourself, Kanae."
"……"
"Isn't that a bit odd?"
Kanae remained silent.
"Odd? How so? Isn't being an anonymous programmer cool?" asked Homura
"All you have to say is 'cool'…? The number of people who can access the Exploration Club's internal community is extremely limited, and most current Exploration Club members who act as volunteer programmers would normally actively participate in order to make the programs easier to use themselves, right?"
Touya and Homura had only learned just earlier that Miss Akado was in a position where she was privy to classified information within the Exploration Club, though.
"Well, don't chastise her so much, Touya," interrupted Toneri. "That's just a simple excuse. Most volunteer programmers just can't stand tedious and redundant source code."
"I know about how you've tinkered with a lot of programs with Akado, though," Kanae pointed out. "Like that tool that processes record photos and creates topographic maps from them, Made-In-Akado."
"I-I also use that program," said Homura in surprise.
"In my opinion, that tool still has a lot of room for improvement, but that's irrelevant. You were the one who helped Akado the most with that one back then, Yuri," countered Toneri.
"Eh… Then, she's been working as a programmer since middle school?"
"It's not like I actually work here or anything… I started coming here back in my second year in middle school."

“That kinda sounds like Misasagi-senpai. Though, it was Ranger training for her.”
“……”
Homura noticed how, upon hearing Misasagi-senpai’s name, Kanae’s expression suddenly turned gloomy, like any timid girl her age. However, that was immediately replaced by Kanae’s usual faintly irritated expression, and Homura’s attention soon turned elsewhere.
It was unclear whether or not Touya realized how provocative his questions were as he continued asking without abating. He definitely didn’t seem to realize it, though.
“You’re so talented at spell composition, yet you aren’t a mage, Kanae?”
“There’s no point in a registry-restricted class like that.”
“That’s quite a rebellious point of view.” Touya somehow seemed a bit happy as he spoke. “Well, it can’t be helped when you don’t have a place to put it into practice, I guess. So, about designing incantations—”
Before Touya could finish, though, Homura stepped forward and interrupted him. What Homura’s interest lay in wasn’t all this technical talk, but rather…
“S-So, you’ve known Ameno-chan here for a while? Since your second year in middle school?”
“…I suppose,” affirmed Kanae.
“Kuuuuuh.”
“Why are you acting so vexed?” asked Touya skeptically.
“But…”
“Don’t worry, Hinooka,” assured Toneri. “Yuri’s object of attachment and devotion isn’t Ameno. Let’s end the small talk here and unveil the main attraction—right, Samari?”
“She’s been listening the whole time,” said Kanae.
Touya and Homura were plainly confused by the knowing words of the two Honba people.
“Eh?”
“She……?”
They followed Toneri and Kanae’s gazes further into the room at the back of the living complex.
In the very center of the room, on a single isolated chair—someone—was sitting there.
Realizing that this person had been there during the entire course of their conversation, Homura suddenly felt the cold air from the air conditioner even more keenly.
“She’s Roto Samari,” explained Toneri. “She’s the second unit to be installed with spirit stone circuits from Nutella after Ameno—in other words, she’s Ameno’s little sister. I personally don’t like using that kind of familial relationship terminology to describe them, but that’s the simplest way of introducing her.”
“Samari… We have guests.”

While calling out to her quietly, Kanae walked into the dimly-lit room.
Meanwhile, Toneri manipulated a nearby electronic screen to increase the transparency rate of the windows and let in sunlight from outside.
The light revealed a young girl sitting on a chair composed of wisteria.
She looked much younger than Ameno, about seven or eight years old.
The white fingers of each of her hands were crossed together lightly on top of her lap. She wore a Gothic-style dress with practically no sign of being worn out.
She showed no reaction to either the increase in brightness in the room or the people gathered around her.
She truly looked like an exquisite and delicate doll.
Underneath her slightly closed eyelids, her red eyes, which shined like garnet, dimly looked at the floor of the room.

“……Is she sleeping…?”
“No. She can properly see and hear us.”
Kanae shook her head at Homura’s hushed question.
“Is she in a state like Ameno’s suspended mode…?”
“No. She’s alive and thinking.”
Kanae shook her head again at Touya’s question.
The robot Samari was a true marvel, tinged with faint warmth from her battery and constructed so accurately and elaborately that she could be mistaken for a human being.
Yet this lifelike being wasn’t moving or breathing, just sitting there completely still—
These conflicting impressions of life and death made it unsettling for Homura to watch her.
“……”
With a gulp, Homura walked closer to better look at the girl.
After Homura’s shadow came to block the light from the window hitting Samari’s cheek, Samari’s eyelids moved a little and her eyelashes twitched ever so slightly.
“……”
Just that slight stir that couldn’t even be called a gesture was enough to deeply impact Homura.
“Like I thought… Samari doesn’t really like it when it’s bright,” said Kanae.
“I don’t think that’s it, though. That’s just a normal reflex in response to change in light intensity.”
Toneri then went on to proudly introduce his creation, but while keeping a certain distance.
“Thought is definitely occurring within the deep parts of Samari’s consciousness. However, she hasn’t shown any outward reaction in words or gestures until now.
“This current body is Amari’s second stage body.
“We moved her spirit stone into it after we confirmed traces of thought process within her, but she hasn’t taken any spontaneous actions. Her development is quite slow compared to Ameno’s.”
Toneri stooped next to the chair and placed Samari’s hand on top of his palm, touching and lightly bending each of her fingers one by one.
Samari tilted her face slightly and looked at her palm.
That was all.
She just sat there, accepting everything that happened in the world around her.
If the wind around her changed, she simply let it brush against it. If snow fell, she simply let it fall on her.
Toneri’s face, which expressed straightforward emotions until now, became tinged with a complicated expression of sorrow.
“Ameno was luckily able to establish self-consciousness, but it’s not like the other researchers and I were certain that she would succeed. It was a huge

gamble as a project. There was also ethical opposition to her growth process which mimicked that of humans. Even so, she was the first success in robot development using spirit stones, even on the international level.
“Ameno didn’t merely pave the way for the prospect of Nutellan probe units. She also greatly contributed as a test unit for home-use caregiving robots, one of Honba’s main businesses. She’s able to immediately understand oral orders and even proactively provides feedback about herself, after all. Thanks to the various pieces of software and hardware spin-offs gained through those tests with her, even this hobby-like research of mine receives a full budget.”
“Ameno-chan really is amazing…!”
“I’m sorry that we still can’t allow Ameno to accompany you all to Nutella.”
Homura and Touya were both shocked to hear such laudable words from Toneri.
Toneri turned back to face Samari.
“Samari’s current body is the second stage model. Naturally, this body is for Earth-use. The monetary development cost of a body that can adapt to doing activities on Nutella is at least one digit higher than for this one. But even leaving the expenses aside, with Samari still stuck in this state… In that sense, we can’t even make use of her as a test unit. She’s still an incomplete robot.”
“……”
Kanae seemed like she wanted to interrupt Toneri’s words, but she ultimately remained silent.
“Will Samari remain like this as long as there’s no change in her?” asked Touya.
“That’s how it is.”
“Incomplete…”
Toneri and Kanae silently gazed at Samari. Homura felt sympathy for their worry in her own way.
“Then… as an example…” Homura searched through her memory for a good comparison. “If you rated the degree of perfection of Sapporo’s best salt ramen by one hundred… what would it currently be at…?”
“Sapporo!?”
Toneri spun around to face Homura with widened eyes.
“Ah, please don’t pay any mind to Hinooka’s space alien talk,” said Touya.
“But I’m asking seriously.”
“That might be true for you, but…”
Toneri was completely flabbergasted.
“You’re probably the first and last person to ever compare the fruits of my research to junk food. At least use pasta as a comparison instead.”
“—Puhaha!”
With slightly delayed timing, Kanae burst out laughing. Perhaps she was actually holding her laughter back quite a bit, since she turned her face away as it turned a bit red.

That was the first time Homura saw her smile.
Homura and the others left Samari's room, while Kanae stayed behind.
The three of them went to drink their own beverages in the eating lounge, which was naturally empty during summer break.
"So… does Samari not respond even if you call her name?"
"That's an excellent question."
Touya asked Toneri that question, bringing back the earlier serious mood a bit.
"Ameno was a rare success, and we gained a lot from studying her achievement as well, so we tried a different approach with Samari. Her current unbalanced state is part of that process… or least, that's my analysis of it."
Toneri scowled as he took a sip from his machine dispenser coffee.
"Why won't she respond to others—?
"It's because Samari believes that she's the only being with intelligence in this universe. That's why she doesn't respond to her name; in the first place, her name has no meaning to her."
"And yet she watches and listens to the things that happen around her…?"
Homura tilted her head in confusion.
"That's right. She believes that the world of information she's collected and constructed in her mind is a dream she's seeing. Perhaps a 'lucid dream' would be the best description. It's a dream where anything and everything happens as you wish."
"We're a dream that Samari-chan is seeing!?"
"Perhaps so."
Toneri leaned forward a little and responded to Homura with a serious expression.
"Hey, Hinooka's going to take you seriously, you know?" said Touya with a wry smile.
"Hah. Yuri always gets angry when she hears me say such theories. She always rebukes, 'Samari understands. She responds when we call out to her. We just don't notice.'"
Homura understood how Kanae felt.
Until now, she hadn't managed to get a good grasp on Kanae Yuri's personality, but today she felt like she had managed to get a glimpse of the kind of person she was.
"We know that her logic circuits are working within her from scans of her spirit stone. However, it's impossible to know or demonstrate whether or not she understands the outside world. There are still only a few robots using spirit stones in existence. It's possible that Ameno's case is actually unique.
"It's also possible… though this is just a wish born of my own ego… that, like Yuri said, Samari is the manifestation of a new form of intelligence that we don't know about."

After Toneri quietly stopped talking there, Touya changed the topic slightly and asked a question.
“What’s the meaning behind the name ‘Samari’? Her full name is… Roto Samari, right?”
“I’m not the one who named her. I let Yuri do that. And the one who named Ameno was Chia. Apparently I’m bad at choosing names.”
“Really? Then what does Samari’s name mean?”
“At first I thought it might be from the word ‘summary’ in computer terminology, but the spelling doesn’t match—the pronunciation comes out as ‘Lot Samari’. It’s probably an anagram of some famous name. Yuri does have her childish side at times. Well, it’s fine to leave that kind of thing as a mystery.”
“…By the sound of it, you don’t know the origin of the name ‘Ameno’ that Fujimori-sensei chose either?”
“I don’t bother listening to trivial things,” said Toneri with a nonchalant nod.
Homura really couldn’t understand this person’s fussy standards.
“I let Yuri spend time around Samari in the hope that it might serve as stimulus to get her to take action. Chia-chan did the same thing in the past.”
“Mori-chan…? What are you referring to?” asked Homura with sudden interest.
“Want to see? It’s fun to watch.”
Hey! It’s not fun to watch![12]
“I’d love to see it!”
“All right, leave it to me,” said Toneri. He manipulated the tablet in his hand and called up the video library list on the screen within the lounge.
Touya nervously backed away a bit.
“Isn’t that… an invasion of privacy…?”
Exactly… But you’re going to watch it anyway, aren’t you?
“It’s this file. It’s from about two years ago.”
Toneri searched through the library files and came to a particular recorded video.
Naturally paying no attention to Touya’s timid attempt to restrain them, Toneri and Homura took up position in front of the screen.
“She wasn’t as completely doll-like as Samari, but Ameno also went through a similar phase—”
Toneri began to explain the video like some documentary narrator.
Speaking of the documentary’s leading role Ameno, Homura had just gotten a message from her saying that her morning tasks with Fujimori had been prolonged and that it didn’t look like she’d be able to come to the Honba Lab today. But that might have been convenient for both parties in this case.
A fixed camera view showed the room that Homura and the others had visited just earlier.
Naturally, the occupant of the room wasn’t Samari.

An unfamiliar young girl was sitting with her legs folded and spread out to either side on the carpet in the center of the room.
“Oooh… A little Ame-chan…”
Homura brought her chair even closer to the screen.
In the video, Ameno had a young appearance like Samari.
Except for the spirit stone housed inside, she had a completely different body than the current Ameno. However, the design of this younger body shared facial traits with her current completed form, as a model of standard human-like growth.
“This is Ameno in her second-stage body.”
“She looks so cute,” Homura squeed.
Ameno wore a simple A-line, one-piece dress. She had her hands placed on the ground in front of her and seemed to be intently staring at something on the carpet. Her expression was stiff without any trace of a smile.
“Cute… huh…” said Toneri.
Homura became unsettled by the vague feeling that some hole had opened up in her heart as she watched the young Ameno. However, she couldn’t remember… just what was supposed to fill that empty space.
“Toneri-san, you’re the one who arranged it so that Ameno-chan would gradually grow up like a human, right? I’ve revised my opinion of you a little.”
“…I don’t know what you’re misunderstanding, but due to that, I ended up being criticized by everyone as being repulsive and perverted and having a doll fetishist personality disorder. But the growth process is the most important part for a Nutellan probe unit. And you should wait a little longer before making any final judgements about me,” said Toneri as he turned back to face the screen.
“Those objects in front of her… are games?” asked Touya.
“That’s right.”
Just as Touya guessed, Ameno was staring at handheld game consoles on the floor in front of her.
Various game consoles were scattered on the floor around her.
But Homura soon noticed that this scene, which looked like the stereotypical room of a child surrounded by various toys, was slightly different from her initial impression.
Because all the game consoles were displaying different games on their screens.
Toneri raised the video’s volume, and a chaotic orchestra of typical electronic sounds, lively BGM and even blows and shouts from fighting games filled the room from the speakers.
It was obvious that all the games, even the consoles that were placed upside down, were being operated at the same time.
But the young Ameno wasn’t touching any one of them.
“I’ve seen Ame-chan remote control various devices like game consoles and cameras occasionally, but… is this… the same thing…?”

Toneri silently nodded at Homura's timid question.
That's right—in other words, the young Ameno was playing over fifteen handheld games all at the same time in the video.
"Did she get cross-wired with the standard wireless connection of the game consoles…?" asked Touya.
Touya intuitively sensed that his question was off the mark, but his mind still couldn't grasp what was happening in the video.
"Ameno can fiddle with electronics around her according to the number of channels her body possesses at the time. She can also receive various videos through wireless signals. If I remember right, she managed to view and manipulate twenty-four circuits at the same time in this video. It is only game consoles which haven't been remodelled to have a wireless connection that she has to directly view with her own eyes."
"They say a master shogi player can face multiple opponents at the same time… So this was that kind of test?"
"Exactly. The results were truly spectacular."
Despite those words of self-praise for his work, Toneri wore a long expression.
"I wanted to test Ameno's abilities to the limit. Not with ordinary methods under physical restrictions, but with other methods—Ameno's existence was a classified secret, of course, but I made arrangements to have Ameno anonymously participate on net game forums. Theoretically, the light absorption module of her spirit stone can easily handle a thousand circuits at once with room to spare. That's true even now, but—"
—What are you doing!?
A loud and angry voice suddenly interrupted the silence of the room within the video.
Homura and Touya jumped from their chairs in surprise.
Toneri frowned and lowered the sound volume.
The person who now entered the video from outside of camera view was Fujimori.
Fujimori practically dived down to sit on her knees right in front of Ameno and grabbed the young robot's face with her hands, forcing Ameno to face her.
Ameno showed little reaction as she looked at Fujimori with her vacant green eyes.
Even so, Fujimori called out to her several times.
Toneri absentmindedly watched the two of them interact in the video.
"…Chia was seriously angry back then. She was pretty terrifying."
"She's usually scary even now, though…"
After saying that, Homura suddenly made a gesture and began to mimic her.
"'E-Enough with the blip-bloping video games! What about your homework?' Something like that?"
"Is she a mother in your mind or something…?"

Touya’s shoulders slumped at Homura’s arbitrary impression of Fujimori, but then he asked a question.
“Was Ameno already able to talk at this point?”
“Just the minimum necessary to communicate. There were practically no cases of her starting a conversation on her own back then. Perhaps it would have been better to show you the emotional scene where she became truly able to communicate… but for some reason, I prefer this one.”
Back in the video, Fujimori seemed to have finally lost her temper at Ameno’s continued lack of response.
Fujimori stood up and starting picking up game consoles, taking out the batteries one by one. She seemed ready to smash them at any moment.
—!?
It was then that Ameno lifted her head for the first time and stared at Fujimori in shock.
Upon understanding what was happening, Ameno quickly snatched away the game console in Fujimori’s hands.
But Fujimori stole it back with even greater force.
——!!
Ameno, now displaying intense anger like a menacing cat, bit Fujimori’s leg.
Fujimori turned expressionless and looked down at Ameno for an instant, and then she casually grabbed Ameno by the scruff of her neck and pulled her off while cautiously observing her.
Fujimori then returned to taking out the batteries, now with an amused expression. In response, Ameno bit her arm this time.
“Awawawawawa.”
Homura trembled at the sight of this fighting scene, but she couldn’t look away from it.
Leaving Fujimori aside, for that kind and friendly Ameno to act like this…
Touya also frowned while watching Ameno’s behavior.
“Uwah… Umm, I have a question for the robot developer here… What about the Three Laws of Robotics…?”
“I didn’t install those unnatural rules in her from the start,” said Toneri.
“—Eh?”
In the video, Fujimori and Ameno grabbed the last remaining game console at the same time and began to pull at it from each side in a game of tug of war.
As each of them pushed at each other’s faces with their free hands, Ameno clung to the console using her whole weight, but Fujimori forcibly tore her off by swinging around, causing Ameno to be thrown back and fall on her backside, and then Fujimori even delivered a finished blow by kicking her and making her roll backwards over the floor.
Ameno quickly vanished from the screen as she rolled backwards all the way to the edge of the room.
“What should we do…? S-Shouldn’t we stop them…?”
“Yeah, that’s impossible.”

It happened two years ago, after all.
“Mori-chan is completely merciless… Ah, that looks like it really hurts…”
“Got that right. I still can’t believe she kicked around a robot that cost more than a Mark-10 tank with no reservation like that.”
“Haah. A tank?”
At that point, part of Toneri’s body entered the video from the edge of the screen.
He was sitting stopped forward on a chair with scraggly stubble on his chin and was dispassionately watching the events within the room.
He even took out a light from his lab coat pocket and began to smoke a cigarette. It was as if he was watching soccer on TV from his living room sofa.
After a while, Fujimori walked over to Toneri and gave him hell as she took away his cigarette. Naturally, smoking was forbidden within the laboratory.
Meanwhile, Ameno seemed to have realized that she couldn’t match Fujimori in brute strength and was cowering with her face covered in a corner of the room.
Homura’s heart felt pained as she watched that pitiful figure.
“Yeah, Ameno’s reaction was truly realistic,” said Toneri, impressed. “When all trial and error is rendered useless, people retreat back to their animalistic self-defence instincts.”
Eventually, perhaps having heard the commotion finally, other researchers entered the room one after another.
Toneri had apparently purposefully not called anyone back during the incident back then.
“Akado wasn’t yet here at the time.”
The video recording seemed to continue further, but Toneri stopped there.
“—Well, there you have it. Awesome, right?”
“……”
“……”
The two high schoolers had received quite a shock, feeling as if they had someone else’s internal family affairs exposed to them.
“I had an idea with this incident. After it happened, I checked Ameno’s telemetry results, and it turned out that all voluntary wireless functions stopped from Ameno after that. She didn’t touch any games for a while afterwards either…”
“…What about Fujimori-sensei? Why did she take away Ameno’s games like that?” asked Homura.
“You don’t understand why?”
“These days, Ame-chan plays with games all the time. She really seems to like them.”
“Right. I didn’t understand at the time either—” said Toneri with a nod.
“Back then, Ameno didn’t have any games she liked. She was fine with whatever was given to her. Chia was the one who obtained Ameno’s spirit stone, but she was forbidden from entering the lab for a while.”

It shouldn’t have happened all that long ago, but due to how quickly Ameno had grown and matured, Toneri’s reminiscent talk sounded as if he were talking about something from years ago.
“In human terms, Ameno was stuck in an apathetic state, similar to how Samari is now. After that incident, I decided to give her back a single game console, one without a wireless connection function and that required her to use direct sight and hearing to play. I limited her to using physical buttons and gestures and voice commands.”
In other words, he had given her a range of freedom limited to what a normal human could do.
“So that kind of thing happened… It sounds just like regular parenting.”
“I’ve often thought to myself that it shouldn’t have been like this. Ah, just to warn you, if you leak out details about this video, Honba will be crushed and go bankrupt. Keep this to yourselves.”
“…Y-Yes. We’ll be careful.”
“Anyway, a few months after that, Ameno’s comprehensive faculties and empathy dramatically advanced and matured. She might have merely been mimicking self-awareness before then. The prospect of having her undergo a major body change finally looked promising at that point.”
“Did this huge scuffle serve as a trigger for her mental growth?” asked Touya.
“Who knows? It pains me to admit it, but I don’t know either. However, when Ameno had mentally stabilized, I had her moved outside of her room. Secretly, that is.”
“Ah… Are you referring to Fujimori-sensei’s…?”
“Get it? That was when I decided to have Ameno do a ‘home stay’ at Chia’s home. It was probably a bother for Chia since it was a busy time for her, but there were no other candidates.”
“So that’s the reason for the name *Fujimori* Ameno.”
Homura decided to take a walk outside the development lab in the evening —
The hot weather had already passed, and the chirping of bugs could be heard everywhere.
The sky was dyed a beautiful collage of red and orange in the sunset. The weather had really been nice today, so much that Homura regretted having spent most of it indoors.
Homura’s attention was caught by a single scooter that was parked in the otherwise empty parking lot and the person who was sitting on the embankment next to it.
The atmosphere that person gave off was different from that of a company employee, so when Homura looked closer to see who it was, she realized it was a familiar face.
The person seemed to be reading from a palm-sized tablet in his hand, but he occasionally looked up and blankly gazed at the sky. He somehow

seemed like an entirely different person from usual, so Homura hesitated to casually call out to him.
She unconsciously came to a stop in the orange-dyed parking lot, gazing at him.
Eventually, he noticed her presence.
“If it isn’t Hinooka-san.”
Hayashi, a second year at Hiyoshizaka High, waved his hand and called out her name.
Homura walked around the scooter and approached him.
“—Are you playing a game, Hayashi-senpai?”
“Something like that.”
“What kind of game?” Homura reflexively asked a question she normally wouldn’t, and she quickly realized how rude it was. “…Sorry, it’s just that I’ve talked a lot about games today.”
Before an awkward pause could be born between them, Hayashi chuckled and answered the question.
“I’ve been trying my hand at sketching[13].”
“——!”
Those words cause Homura to stiffen.
Staying silent here was the correct move, but Homura accidentally revealed her true thoughts through her expression, thereby falling for Hayashi’s trap.
“Would you understand better if I called it drawing?”
“……”
“Basically, I make strong strokes and splatter the youthful color of ivory white, and then—”
“Yes, yes, you’re sketching. Sketching!”
Realizing she’d been had, Homura purposefully repeated herself to end that line of conversation.
Forestalled from saying any further, Hayashi-senpai merely grinned.
Homura had unintentionally let her guard down. She’d forgotten that this boy rivaled young Akiho in never overlooking these kinds of opportunity.
Homura keenly felt Koma-senpai’s hardships.
Still, this was her first time facing Hayashi alone like this—
However, she strangely didn’t feel uneasy talking with him, perhaps because his behavior seemed so relaxed and natural. He was quite different from Touya, who was usually concerned with the time and place for everything.
However, where had that different Hayashi she’d glimpsed just now gone to?
“Heh… Sorry if this sounds rude, but I’m a bit surprised to hear that you draw pictures.”
“My, I’m quite mortified to hear you have such an impression of me.”
Hayashi turned around the tablet to show it to her, and the screen displayed a watercolor painting app. The summer sky was drawn in pale tones on the small canvas.

Hayashi immediately tried to take the tablet away and hide it behind his back, but Homura grabbed the edge of the tablet as payback for making her technically say a vulgar word and took her time looking at the screen.
Still, this sketch really did seem to make her mood lighten slightly as she looked at it—
…Hmph… So he draws pictures like this…
It was very, very gentle-looking picture.
Hayashi asked Homura a question.
“You came here today with Touya on Exploration Club business, right?”
“Ah, yes. So you knew about it.” Homura nodded. “What about you, Hayashi-senpai?”
“I’m here to pick up Yuri.”
“…Then, is that your scooter over there?”
The electric scooter casting a thin shadow on the parking lot was a slightly large two-seater model.
Homura could understand if it belonged to Hayashi, who she’d often seen accompanying Kanae like her boyfriend. However, Homura’s guess was off.
“No, that’s Yuri’s scooter. She just got her license for it. She seems to be having a lot of fun driving it around everywhere.”
“It’s Kanae-san’s?” Homura was surprised and even felt a little thrilled by that unexpected answer. “…Yeah, I have heard that there are people who had their motorcycle license in the same grade as me. Kanae-san is an amazingly active person.”
“‘Despite how she looks’, you mean to say, right?” joked Hayashi.
Homura glared at Hayashi with a pout.
“And despite how you look, senpai, you draw pictures… Hey, could I look at the sketch one more time?”
“Sorry. I deleted it.”
“Eh…?” Homura couldn’t believe he had so easily deleted that sketch which had moved her. “What a waste. Do you not keep any of your other sketches either?”
“I just do it to pass the time. Don’t you think it’s odd to keep something made so casually?”
“Hmm… Is that so? I still think it’s a waste, though. It was such a great sketch. Do you like landscape drawing?”
“Well, a bit, I suppose.”
Hayashi nodded in a slightly bashful manner.
“Then you must be able to draw as much as you like on Nutella with all the places with superb views there.”
“Yeah, I suppose.”
“Still, Kanae-san is so slow. I’ll go call her.”
“Ah, please don’t, please. Also, it can’t be helped since you happened to see me here, but please don’t tell anyone else from the Exploration Club about my sketches.”
“…All right.”

Homura found it curious that Hayashi was keeping his hobby a secret. He had smoothly begged her not to spread it around, but she could tell that those were his true feelings, so she obediently agreed to his request.
Homura slowly nodded and then turned to look up at the sunset sky.
“I see… so sketching is also another means. Real photos aren’t the only method to convey Nutella to others.”
“You might be right.”
Homura felt like her impression of Hayashi being transparent and hard to grasp had changed a little.
In the end, her true objective in coming here today, providing a scanned sample of her brain wave, had been completed pretty quickly. Based on Chief Toneri’s bored face, it appeared he hadn’t gotten the results he’d wanted from it, though.
During the scanning, Touya hadn’t had anything to do, so he’d apparently gone to talk with Akado about Nutellan magic in the cafeteria lounge. However, Toneri, who should have been analyzing the data from the scans, had gone to join them and then even Kanae Yuri was pulled in to join them as she was passing them, resulting in a long and technical conversation between the four of them.
Homura had been pretty much an outsider there, so she’d left.
The reason Hayashi was killing time outside in a place like this instead of waiting inside the air-conditioned lab was likely because that technical conversation was an everyday occurrence he was painfully experienced with.
While faintly hoping that Hayashi would start another sketch, Homura inadvertently looked up at the sunset sky again.
“It’s faded to the point where it’s nearly gone now, huh?”
“…Hmm?”
Homura and Hayashi both looked up at the west corner of the sky, where the clouds had broken away and bright stars had begun to appear. The sky there was a deep blue that was on the verge of entering the domain of night.
“You know, that red and wavering—” Homura kept looking across the sky for it.
“Ah, that? It’s already set out of sight in this season,” said Hayashi, pointed below the horizon.
“Eh, really? Huh?”
“The only times you can see it… is basically in spring. Though I don’t know whether that will still hold true next year.”
Hayashi-senpai really does observe the sky a lot, thought Homura, impressed, but she was also struck by a depressing thought. I might just be spacing out when I look up at the sky…
Homura had brought up the subject because she’d gotten the impression that she’d seen *it* in the western sky after the end of spring.

It was a small, faint red blotch that you'd easily miss if you didn't look for it carefully. It looked like a flower adorning the sky as a meager offering, or perhaps a drop of spilled blood.
Homura had been looking for it in the sky just now because she knew that unique accent in the night sky would disappear in the near future.
"It used to be part of a constellation, you know?" Homura told Hayashi in a slightly proud tone.
"I know," muttered Hayashi. "It's written in our textbooks, remember?"
"Right."
"Hinooka-san, what were you doing at the time of its death[14]?"
"The truth is… I don't really remember."
"I was right here at the time."
Wow.
"Heh. Then you got to see it clearly?"
"Hmm… No, I had just gone to the toilet when it happened. I noticed it was suddenly really bright outside the window, and there was a big commotion around the lab. I couldn't even manage to go outside to see it. I was really confused and flustered at the time."
Homura giggled as Hayashi exposed yet another very embarrassing memory of his. The way he re-enacted his confusion was so real and funny that tears came out as she laughed.
"Haha… So you've been with Kanae-san since that long ago."
"Yeah, that's right. Actually, we're more like childhood friends with a rotten yet inseparable relationship, I guess? Something along those lines."
Hayashi frankly described his relationship with Kanae. But deep down, he probably treasured his long relationship with Kanae a lot. Perhaps it was because he was so close to her that it clouded his view of her. People only truly noticed the things important to them after they disappeared.
"That girl is smart and has amazing concentration, but she's completely no good when it comes to her everyday life. If left alone, she'd wear the same clothes and eat the same things all the time. Someone's got to look after her." After babbling all that, Hayashi suddenly realized what he'd been doing and looked up at the sky. "Sorry, I was being gross just now."
Homura earnestly shook her head.
"No, not at all. I'm honestly jealous of Kanae-san, for having such a funny and reliable guy as a big brother figure."
"Hah? I'm not like that all…" Hayashi scowled, but then turned to look at her with a serious expression. "…I see, is that how it is, Hinooka-san? You don't need to hold back because of Yuri, you can just go ahead and go on the offensive with me, you know?"
"There's no way I could do something so scary."
"What do you mean, scary? Then how about you and Touya-kun, Hinooka-san?"
That was a disadvantageous return pass for Homura. But Homura had foreseen that as well.

“You’re really easygoing, Hayashi-senpai.”
“Am I?”
Easygoing…?
…No. It was more like he always acted disconnected from everything, as if he had entrusted all his feelings to someone else.
It was a very carefree, slightly sad and harmless way of living that Homura also knew very well.
It was a memory she had intended to leave hidden at the bottom of her heart, but then she suddenly wanted to see what face he would make if she mentioned it, so despite thinking herself an idiot for doing so, she brought it up.
“Umm… I’m sorry. I heard you guys at night during the SA. Err, I didn’t do it out of malice, it was just a coincidence… No, I guess I was a bit curious…”
“During the SA?”
Hayashi wore an unreadable smile.
“What did you mean by… ‘instructions’…?” Homura timidly asked.
“Ah. You heard that?”
Hayashi shrugged without looking fazed at all. And then—
“…?”
He pointed behind her, and Homura noticed that there were figures approaching them from that direction.
It was pretty dark and hard to see at this point, but Hayashi had apparently recognized them right away.
Akado walked over to them along with Touya and Kanae.
Just when she was thinking they should temporarily halt the topic they were talking about… Hayashi actually blithely explained their entire conversation to Kanae.
……!
As Homura fearfully listened from the side, Kanae turned to stare hard at her, and then dispassionately spoke with no signs of condemning her or feeling shy about the topic.
“…It’s nothing that I’m going out of my way to hide or anything. Did you hear about it from the club president?”
“Club president…? You mean Hiyoshizaka’s Koma-senpai… or Misasagi-senpai from our club?”
Kanae nodded.
“From club president Misasagi. President Kamikoma also knows about it, though. But it’s nothing like actual orders or anything… Ah, what a pain…”
Kanae sighed and then, without further ado, revealed the heart of the matter.
“Tenryuu is my older brother. So that’s how it is.”
“Hah?”
“Eh?”
Homura and Touya were taken aback by this sudden confession.

What do you mean, ‘so that’s how it is’? That’s a huge leap there. Hayashi merely shrugged slightly.
And as Homura and Touya continued to stare at her, Kanae expressionlessly stared, as if to say, ‘Still not enough for you?’, and continued speaking.
“Misasagi Mayo is Tenryuu Kazuma’s betrothed.”
“Be…tro…thed?” asked Touya, dumbfounded
It felt as if they had been told one very important revelation after another.
However, Homura still had yet to understand—
“B-Betrothed… What’s that? Is it some kind of food… or not, I guess…?”
Touya was unable to react to Homura’s lame joke, completely flabbergasted and open-mouthed as he was.
“Hinooka-san… you’ve never heard of the word ‘betrothed’? I guess that’s not unusual, though,” remarked Akado.
It appeared that Akado was also aware of the circumstances in question, and she explained the meaning of the word without missing a beat.
“A betrothed is someone a person’s parents have promised to marry them to in the future. Basically, it means being engaged. A fiancée.”
Homura finally managed to grasp the conversation.
“So,” Homura slowly said as Kanae’s words dawned on her. “…Tenryuu-senpai and Misasagi-senpai are fiancées?”
“Yes. Misasagi Mayo will eventually become my sister-in-law.”
After saying just that, Kanae took out a pair of helmets from her scooter and tossed one to Hayashi. As Hayashi looked at the rest of them with a slightly apologetic expression, Kanae made him straddle the back seat behind her and then took off from the parking lot without glancing back at Homura and the others.
“……She left, huh.”
“……”
Only the satisfied-looking Akado and Homura and Touya were left behind in the darkening parking lot as the scooter disappeared into the distance.
“Hey… Touya-kun? Are you alive? Are you breathing?”
Homura shook the young man’s shoulders.
Touya’s face had turned pale.
Homura had something she wanted to consult him about, but it appeared she would have to postpone that for a while.
Back in the lab, after the analysis of the brain scans were finished.
Seeming to have obtained no promising results, Toneri indifferently responded with no sign of surprise or disappointment in his tone when they came back inside.
“—Hinooka Homura.”
However, he called Homura to a stop before leaving and asked her a question out of the blue.
“Do you have any recollection of the name Sanduleak[15]?”
“…Huh? Sandu…?”
“Sanduleak.”

Sanduleak. What language was it from?
Toneri had said it was a ‘name’. So then, a person’s name?
Either way, it was definitely the first time Homura had ever heard it.
Toneri didn’t give any further hints, so Homura just shook her head to indicate she had no clue what it was.
“I see. Then forget about it.” Toneri simply dropped the subject there and said no further.
To be continued.
Chapter 11 END

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

(1) Shitsuke: a Japanese dish consisting mainly of fish boiled in soy sauce.
(2) O-Bon: a traditional summer festival in Japan based in Buddhist tradition that honors the spirits of one's ancestors, though it's much more casual and festive in modern times.
(3) Akita-type beauty: a phrase that refers to the common view about how Japanese women from Akita Prefecture and coast regions in general look beautiful due to their distinctive white skin.
(4) Buon Giorno! Signore! (Italian) = Good morning, mister!
(5) Obviously, refers to the many attractive women that appear in James Bond movies.
(6) Babirusa: a genus of pig. Also known as "deer-pig".
(7) 2LDK apartment: refers to apartment with 2 bedrooms and an additional area with a Living room, Dining room and Kitchen.
(8) Reference to "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", a ballad written by Goethe, but which is more famous these days for its movie adaptation by Disney.
(9) Kamaboko: steamed seasoned fish paste.
(10) Shizuoka Prefecture is famous for its seafood.
(11) GUI: Graphical user interface, a type of user interface that allows users to interact with electronic devices through graphical icons and visual indicators such as secondary notation.
(12) To be clear, this line isn't Homura's thoughts, but rather directly from the narrator of the story.
(13) The word for "sketching" in Japanese can also mean "ejaculation", which Hayashi does on purpose to get a reaction out of Homura. ;P
(14) For those who haven't guessed based on all the hints, Hayashi and Homura are talking about a supernova where a star 'dies' in a huge explosion, which, when bright enough, can be seen with the naked in the sky from Earth, sometimes even during the day, for a time until it gradually fades away.
(15) Not 100% sure whether it is referring to this or not, but Sanduleak -69° 202 is a star that went supernova. The light of that supernova first became visible in Earth's sky in 1987.

Afterword

I somehow managed to make a sequel volume. (Phew)
This novel series is still being developed as I haphazardly bluff my way through writing, but if it has managed to alleviate your boredom and satisfy your urge to read print books even a little, then I'm happy.
Eh, you still can't make a final judgement with just the first half of the volume? Ah, yes, you've got a point there.
The stage of this book was a southern island, but I plan to make the stage of the second half a winter adventure on Nutella.
And Ameno will also finally get to go to Nutella. The whole idea of this novel series actually started from an idle conversation with Takeuchi Takashi-san that was basically about 'Robot girls sure are nice~'. To think that the essential robot girl in question would only start taking a serious part of the story in the fourth book… I can tell it's going to be quite hard going ahead. (Liar, liar)
The number of characters has also considerably increased.
First, the former club member Inari Sunao, then the club members from the neighbouring Hiyoshizaka High, and lots of others, etc. The main members surrounding the protagonist Hinooka Homura have also been gradually established, hopefully creating a proper school-like atmosphere.
I said as a joke to my illustrator and character designer BUNBUN, "In the second volume, I'll be adding fifty characters all at once, so I look forward to your help", but I let out a delighted shriek when he kept tossing me designs one after another at such a fervent pace that he likely would have made designs for a hundred characters if I left him to his own devices. I was once more deeply impressed by how he was able to create and draw all the transformations, Exploration Club outfits and changes of clothes so well and with so much variation.
I also have to give thanks to the painstaking work of Rounin-san, who was once more put in charge of background illustrations.
However, though I called this an 'adventure in another world', this novel series seems to be stuck in hills and fields and hasn't really visited those kinds of fantastical places yet. But I think that I'll be able to write the kind of setting expected for this genre in the next volume, for sure. Please look forward to it. I most certainly am.
I want to release the second half of this volume in winter (to fit with the season within the story, I guess?). I beg your patience and respectfully ask you to wait a while.
When we published the two halves of the previous volume at the same time, I later learned that there were mix-ups between the two books for a lot of people. This time, that definitely shouldn't happen. Probably. The first half

of this volume has a summer-themed front cover, while the second half will have a winter-themed front cover.
Now then, it seems the time has come to for me to face this pain-filled reality… Kuh, please settle down, my aching molars…!

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